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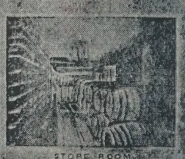
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THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER.

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THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

OR,

MADELINE PAYNE.

BY

LAWRENCE L. LYNCH

(E. MURDOCH VAN DEVENTER),

AUTHOR OF

"THE RIVAL DETECTIVES," "THE DIAMOND COTERIE," "OUT OF A LABYRINTH,"
"MOINA: A DETECTIVE STORY," ETC. ETC.

WARD, LOCK, BOWDEN & CO.,
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THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER;

OR,

MADELINE PAYNE.

CHAPTER I.

MAN PROPOSES.

"H'm! And you scarcely remember your mother, I suppose?"

"No, Lucian; I was such a mere babe when she died. I have often wondered what it would be like to have a mother. Auntie Hagar was always very kind to me, however; so kind, in fact, that my step-father, fearing, he said, that I would grow up self-willed and disobedient, sent her away, and procured the services of the ugly old woman you saw in the garden. Poor Auntie Hagar," sighed the girl, "she was sorely grieved at our parting, and, that she might be near me, bought the little cottage in the field yonder."

"Oh!" ejaculated the man, more as if he felt that he was expected to say something than as if really interested in the subject under discussion. "Ah—er—was—a— was the old lady a property holder, then? Most discharged servants go up and down on the earth, seeking what they may devour—in another situation."

"That is the strangest part of the affair, Lucian; she had money. Where it came from, I never could guess, nor would she ever give me any information on the subject. It was a legacy—that was all I was to know, it seemed."

"I remember," she continued, musingly, "how very much astonished I was to receive, from my step-father, a lecture on this head. He took the ground that my childish curiosity was unpardonably rude, and angrily forbade me to ask further questions. And I am sure that since that one instance of wonderful regard for the feelings of Aunt Hagar, he has not deigned to consider the comfort and happiness of any, save and always himself."

As the girl's voice took on a tone of scornful sarcasm; as her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed while memory recalled the many instances of unfeeling cruelty and neglect, that had brought tears to her childish eyes and pain to her lonely heart—the eyes of Lucian Davlin became bright with admiration, and something more; something that might have caused her honest eyes to wonder and question, if she had but intercepted the glance. But her thoughts had taken a backward turn. Without looking up, perceiving by his silence that he had no desire to interrupt her, she proceeded, half addressing herself:

"I used to ask him about my mother, and was always informed that he 'didn't care to converse of dead folks.' Finally, he assured me that he was 'tired of seeing my sickly, ugly face,' and that, as I would have to look after myself when he was dead and gone, I must be educated. Therefore, I was sent to the dreary Convent School at M——. And there I studied hard, looking forward to the time when, having learned all they could teach me, I might breathe again outside the four stone walls; for, by my step-papa's commands, I was not permitted to roam outside the sisters' domains until my studies should reach an end. Then they brought me back, and my polite step-papa called me an 'educated idiot;' and my good old Hagar cried over me; and I made friends with the birds and the trees. Ever

since, always avoiding my worthy ancestor-in-law, I have been wondering what it would be like to be happy among true friends, in a bright spot somewhere far away from this place, where I never have been happy for a day at a time, even as a child."

"Never, little girl?" The eyes were very reproachful, and the man's hand was held out entreatingly. "Never, darling?"

She looked up in his face shyly yet trustfully, and then putting her hand in his, said: "Never until I knew you, Lucian; and always since, I think, except ——"

She hesitated, and the colour fled out of her face.

"Except when I think that the day draws near when you will leave me. And when the great world has swallowed you up, you will forget the 'little girl' you found in the woods, perhaps."

A smile flitted across the face of the listener, and he turned away for a moment to conceal the lurking devil gleaming out of his eyes. Then, flinging away his half-finished cigar, he took both her hands in his, and looking down into her clear eyes, said:

"Then don't let me go away from you, beauty. Don't stay here to make dismal meditations among the gloomy trees. Don't pass all the weary Winter with Curmudgeon, who will marry you to an old bag of gold. Come with me; come to the city and be happy. You shall see all the glories and beauties of the gay, bright world. You shall put dull care far behind you. You shall be my little Queen of Hearts, to love and care for always. Sweetheart, will you come?"

He was folding her close now, and she nestled in his arms with perfect trustfulness, with untold happiness shining in her bright eyes. She was in no haste to answer his eager question, and he smiled again; and once more the lurking devil laughed out of his eyes. But he held her tenderly to him, in silence for a time, and then lifted the blushing face to meet his own.

"Look up, Aileen, my own! Is it to be as I wish? Will you leave this place with me to-morrow night?"

The girl drew back with a start of surprise. "You—you surely are not going to morrow, Lucian," and the gentle voice trembled.

"I must, little one—have just received a letter calling me back to the city. Your sweet face has already kept me here too long. But I shall take it back with me, shall I not, love; and never lose it more?"

The girl was silent. She loved him only too well, and yet this peremptory wooing and sudden departure struck upon her naturally sensitive nerves as something harsh and unpleasant. She would not leave behind much love, would be missed by few friends, and yet—to leave her home once was to leave it for ever, and it was home after all. She looked at the man before her, and a something, her good angel, perhaps, seemed almost against herself to move her to rebel.

"Why must I go like a runaway, Lucian? I can't bear to bid you go, and yet, if you must, why not leave me for a little time? My father will never consent, I well know, but let me tell him, and then go openly, after he has had time to become familiar with the idea."

"After he has had time to lock you up! Recollect, you are not of age, Aileen. After he has had time to force you into a marriage with your broken-backed old lover After he has had time to poison your mind against me ——"

"Lucian! as if he could do *that; he*, indeed!" The girl laughed scornfully.

It is not difficult to guess how this affair would have terminated. The man was handsome and persuasive; the girl trustful, loving, and, save for him, so she thought, almost friendless.

But an unexpected event interrupted the eloquence flowing from the lips of Lucian Davlin, and set the mind of the girl free to think one moment, unbiassed by the mesmeric power of his mind, eye and touch.

They were standing in a little grove, near which ran the footpath leading into the village of Bellair. Suddenly, as if he had dropped from one of the wide-spreading trees, a very fat boy, with a shining face and a general air of "knowingness," appeared before them.

"I beg pardon, sir," proclaimed he, "but as you told me if a tellergram come for you to fetch it here, so I did."

And staring at Madeline the while, he produced a yellow envelope from some interior region, and presented it to Lucian Davlin, who tore open the cover, and took in the purport of the message at one glance. His face wore a variety of expressions: annoyance, satisfaction, surprise, all found place as he read. He stood in a thoughtful attitude for a brief time, and then, as if he had settled the matter in his own mind, said:

"All right, Mike. Go back now, and tell Bowers to prepare to leave to-night. I'll come down and send the required answer immediately. Here, take this."

Tossing him a piece of money, Lucian turned to Madeline, over whose face a look of sorrowful wonder was creeping.

"'Man proposes,' my dear! Well, I am 'disposed of' for a time. It is only one night sooner, and, after all, what matter? Will you decide for me at once, Maidie? Nay, I see you hesitate still, and time just now is precious. Think till to-night, then; think of the lonely days here without me; think of me, alone in the big world, wishing and longing for *you*. I could not even write you in safety. Think fast, little woman; and when evening comes, meet me here with your answer. If it must be separation for a time, dear, tell me when I shall come back for you."

The girl drew a breath of relief. He would come back—that would be better. But seeing his anxiety to be gone, she only said: "Very well, Lucian, I will be here."

"Then, good-bye till evening."

A swift kiss and a strong hand clasp, and he strode away. Trampling down the wayside daisies and tender Spring grasses; insensible to the beauties of earth and sky; smiling still that same queer, meaning smile, he took the path leading back to the village. Reaching the site, where the woody path terminated in the highway, he turned. Yes, she was looking after him; she would be, he knew. He kissed his hand, lifted his hat with a courtly gesture, and passed out of her sight.

"Gad!" he ejaculated, half aloud, "she is a little beauty; and half inclined to rebel, too. She won't go with me to-night, I think; but a few weeks of this solitude without me, and my Lady Bird will capitulate. The old Turk, her step-father, won't raise much of a hue and cry at her flight, I fancy. Wonder what is the secret of his antipathy to Miss Payne."

He paced on, wrinkling his brow in thought a moment, and then whistling softly as his fancies shaped themselves to his liking. Suddenly he stopped, turned, and looked sharply about him.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed. "Strange if I can't extract from a broken down old woman any items of family history that might serve my purpose. I'll call on the nurse—what's her name—to-night."

He glanced across the meadow to where stood the cottage of Nurse Hagar, and, as if satisfied with himself and his brilliant last idea, resumed his walk. Presently his pace slackened again, and he looked at the crumpled paper which he still retained in his hand, saying:

"It's queer what sent Cora to the city for this flying visit. I must keep my Madeline out of her way. If they should meet—whew!"

Evidently, direful things might ensue from a meeting between Madeline Payne and this unknown Cora, for after a prolonged whistle, a brief moment of silence, and then a short laugh, Davlin said:

"I should wear a wig at least," and he laughed again. "I wonder, by Jove! I wonder if old Arthur's money bags are

heavy enough to make a card for Cora. Well, I'll find that out too."

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD TREE'S REVELATIONS.

MEANWHILE, strange feelings filled the heart, and troublesome thoughts the head, of Madeline Payne.

She looked about her sorrowfully. The leafy wood seemed one of her oldest, truest friends. Since her mother's death, she had lived, save for the faithful regard of old Hagar, an unloved life. In the only home she knew, she felt herself an object of dislike, and met only cold neglect or rude repulsion. So she had made a friend of the shady wood, and welcomed back the birds, in early Springtime, with joyful anticipation of Summer rest under green branches, lulled and soothed by their songs.

Wandering here, the acquaintance between herself and Lucian Davlin had begun. Here six long, bright weeks of the Springtime had passed, each day finding them lingering longer among the leafy shadows, and drawing closer about them both the cords of a destiny sad for one, fatal for each.

Standing with hands clasped loosely before her, eyes down dropped, and foot tapping the mossy turf, Madeline presented a picture of youth and loveliness such as is rarely seen in a beauty-abounding land. A form of medium height, which would, in later years, develop much of stately grace; a complexion of lily-like fairness; and eyes as deep and brown, as tender and childlike, as if their owner were gazing, ever and always, as infants gaze, who see only great, grand wonders, and never a woe or fear.

With a wee, small mouth, matching the eyes in expression, the face was one to strike a casual observer as lovely—as childishly sweet, perhaps. Yet there was something more than childishness in the broad brow and firm chin. The little white hands were shapely and strong; and the dainty feet pressed down the daisies softly yet firmly, with quiet but steady movement.

Many a man has been mistaken in baby mouth and sweetly-smiling eyes. And whoso should mistake Madeline Payne, in the time to come, for "just a child and nothing more," would reckon unwisely, and mayhap learn this truth too late.

Madeline sat down upon a fallen tree, where she had so often talked with her lover. She looked up into the wide-spreading branches overhead. There was the crooked bough where she had, often and often, in past days, sought refuge when troubled by her father's harshness, or haunted by dreams of the mother she had hardly known. It looked cool and inviting, as if she could think to better purpose shrouded by the whispering leaves. She stepped upon the fallen trunk, and, springing upward, caught a bending limb, and was soon seated cosily aloft, smiling at thought of what Lucian would say could he see her there. Long she pondered, silent, motionless. Finally, stirring herself and shaking lightly an overhanging friendly branch, she exclaimed:

"That will be best! I'll stay here for the present. I'll tell step-papa that I love Lucian, and will never marry his friend, Amos Adams, the old fright! I'll try and be very calm, and as dutiful as maybe. Then, if he turns me out, very well. If he shuts me up——" Her eyes flashed and she laughed; but there was little of mirth in the laughter. "Why, then I *would* lead him a life, I think! Yes, I'll bid Lucian good-bye for a little while, and I'll try and not miss him too much, for—— Oh!"

She had been very busy with her own half-spoken thoughts, else she must have sooner discovered their approach, for now they were almost underneath her, and they were no less personages than her step-father, John Arthur, and her would-be suitor, Amos Adams.

Madeline wa about to make known her presence, but her ear caught the fragment of a sentence in which her name held prominent place. Acting upon impulse, she remained a silent, unsuspected listener:

And so began in her heart and life that drama of pain and passion, sin and mystery, that should close round, and harden and blight, the darkening future of Madeline Payne.

A more marked contrast than the two men presented could scarcely be imagined.

John Arthur might have been, evidently had been, a handsome man, years ago. But it did not seem possible that, even in his palmiest days, Amos Adams could have been called anything save a fright. He was much below the medium height. His head was sunken between his shoulders and thrust forward, and each feature of his ugly face seemed at war with every other: while the glance of his greenish-gray eye was such as would cause a right-minded person involuntarily to cross himself and utter, with perfect propriety, the Pharisee's prayer.

"The mischief fly away with you, man," said Mr. Arthur, seating himself upon the fallen tree, and striking at the ground fiercely with his cane; "what is my dead wife to you? Madeline makes my life a burden by these same queries. It's none of your business why the departed Mrs. Arthur left her property to me during my life, and tied it up so as to make me only nominal master—mine to use but not to sell, not one acre, not a tree or stone; all must go intact to Miss Madeline, curse her, at my death."

"Um-m, yes. Does the girl know anything of this?"

"If she did, your chances would be slim," said the other, scornfully. "No; I have taken good care that she should not. She has a vixenish temper, if she should get waked up to imagine herself 'wronged,' or any such school-girl nonsense. I shall not live many years—this heart disease is gaining on me fast; and if the girl is your wife, in case of my death the fortune is as good as yours, you know. I want to have peace while I do live; and for this reason, I say, I will give you my step-daughter in marriage, and you shall give me the note you hold against me for that old debt, the payment of which would compel me to live like a beggar for the remainder of my days, and the sum of ten thousand dollars."

"It's making a wife a rather expensive luxury," quoth old Amos, seating himself; "but the girl's a beauty—no disputing that point; and——"

"Of course she is," broke in Arthur, impatiently; "worth that, and more, to whoever wants her, which, fortunately for you, I don't; she is only a kill-joy to me. If you want the girl, take her, and be blessed—I'll give away the bride with all the pleasure in the world—and 'live happy ever after.'"

There was not much room for argument between these two, it was simply a question of exchange; and when old Amos had decided that he was not paying too dearly for so fair a piece of flesh and blood, they came to terms without more ado, and being agreed that "it's always best to strike while the iron is hot," Mr. Arthur suggested that his friend return with him, accept a seat at his hospitable board, and hear himself announced formally to Miss Madeline as her future lord and master. John Arthur had ever exacted and received passive obedience from his step-daughter. He had little fear of rebellion now. How could she rebel? Was she not dependent upon his bounty for her daily bread even?

Old Amos troubled his ugly head little, if any, on this point. He recognised no higher potentate than gold. He had bought him a wife; he had but to pay the price and take possession of the property.

Madeline Payne sat long on her leafy perch, thinking fast and hard, the expressions of her face changing rapidly as she

revolved in her mind different phases of the situation. Surprise gave place to contempt, as she eyed the departing plotters from her green hiding-place. Contempt merged into amusement as she thought of the wonderful contrast between the two wooers who had proffered their respective suits, in a manner so very different, beneath that self-same tree. A look of fixed resolve settled down upon her countenance at last; and uncurling herself, she dropped lightly upon the ground.

Madeline had made up her mind. That it would be useless to say aught of Lucian, she now knew too well. That she could never defy her father's commands and still dwell beneath her father's roof, she also knew. She hesitated no longer. Fate, stronger than she, had decided for her, she reasoned. Her mind once made up, she gave in it no place to fears or misgivings. The strength of will and the spirit of rebellion, that were dormant in her nature, began to stir into life, roused by the injustice that would rob her of her own. She not only had a way of escape, but that way her own inclinations lured her. With never a fear, never a thought of the days to come, she turned from her mockery of a home, from her parent, unnatural, unloving and unloved, to an unknown, untried world, which was all embodied in one word—Lucian.

The past held for her many dark shadows; the future held all that she craved of joy and love—Lucian.

In her outraged heart, there was no room for grief. She had heard her dead mother scorned, and by him who, more than all others, should have cherished her memory and honoured her name. She had heard herself bartered away, as a parcel of goods, and her very life weighed in the balance as a most objectionable thing. Her happiness was scoffed at; her wishes ignored as if without existence and contrary to all nature; even her liberty was menaced.

Slowly she turned away, and very thoughtful was her face as she went, but fixed in its purpose as fate itself: and fearless still as if life had no dark places, no storm clouds, no despair.

Oh! they were lovely, innocent eyes; and oh! it was a sweet, sweet mouth! But the eyes never wavered and the mouth had no trace of weakness in its dainty curves. You have reckoned without your host, John Arthur. It is no common-place school-girl with whom you have to deal. Madeline Payne possesses a nature all untried, yet strong for good or evil. Intense in love or hate, fearless to do and dare, she will meet the fate you bring upon her—but woe to those who have compassed her downfall! If your hand has shaped the destiny of her life, she will no less overrule your future, and from afar—perhaps unrecognised, unseen—mete out to you measure for measure!

The grand old tree is sighing out a farewell. The sunlight is casting fantastic shadows where her foot, but a moment since, rested. The leaves glisten and and whisper strange things. The golden buttercups laugh up in the sun's face, as if there were no drama of loving and hating, sin and atonement, daily enacted on their green, motherly bosom. And Madeline Payne has put her childhood behind her, and turned her face to the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORY OF A CRIME.

Nurse Hagar was displeased. She plied her knitting-needles fiercely, and seemed to rejoice in their sharp clicking. She rocked furiously backwards and forwards, and sharply admonished the cat to "take himself away, or she "would certainly rock on his tail." She "wanted to do something to somebody, she did!" She looked across the fields in the direction of Oakley, and dropping her knitting and bringing her chair to a tranquil state, soliloquised:

"It's always the way with young folks; they don't never remember that old 'uns have feelings. Th run away after a new

face, and if it's a young one and a handsome one, they turn everybody out of their thoughts; everybody else. Not that I think that city fellow's a handsome chap, by no means," she grumbled; "but Maidie does, that's certain sure. And she won't let me say a word about him—oh, no; I'm a poor old woman, and my advice is not wanted!"

Hagar resumed her knitting and her rocking with fresh vigour. But her face relaxed a measure of its grimness as, looking up, her eye rested on a dainty nosegay, tossed in at the window only that morning by this same neglectful young girl.

"She don't mean to forget me, to be sure," she resumed. "She is always kind and gentle to her old nurse. She is lonesome, of course, and should have young company, like other girls, but"—here the needle slacked again—"drat that city chap! I wish he had stayed away from Bellair."

"Goodness, Auntie, what a face! I am almost afraid to come in."

Madeline laughed, despite her anxiety, as Aunt Hagar permitted her opinion of the "city feller" to manifest itself in every feature.

"Get that awfully defiant look out of your countenance, Auntie," continued Madeline, "for I'm coming in to have a long talk with you, and I must not be frightened in the beginning."

The lovely face disappeared from the open window, and in a moment reappeared in the doorway.

To permit herself to be propitiated in a moment, however, was not in the nature of Dame Hagar.

"I s'pose you think it's very respectful to pop your saucy head in at an old woman's window and set her all of a tremble, and then tell her, because she is not grinning for her own amusement, that she looks awfully cross and that you are afraid she will bite you. You are a nice one to talk of being afraid; you, who never showed an atom of fear of anything from your cradle up. If you were a bit afraid when you were out in the woods, for instance, and meet a long-legged animal with a smooth tongue and eyes that ought to make you nervous, 't wouldn't be to your discredit, I think. Of course, I don't mean to say that you don't meet him quite by accident; oh, no! And I don't *say* that he ain't a very nice, respectable sort of chap, whatever I may *think*. You are just like your poor mother, and if this fellow with a name that might as well be Devil and done with it ——"

"There, now, Auntie"—Madeline's face flushed, and she put the cat down with sudden emphasis—"I won't let you say bad things of Mr. Davlin, for I think you would be sorry for it afterward."

She drew a low seat to the side of the old lady, and, looking her full in the face, spoke in a voice, low, intense, full of purpose.

"Auntie, it is time you told me more about my mother. You have evaded, my step-father has forbidden, my questioning, but if I am ever to know aught of my dead mother's history, I intend to hear it from your lips to-day."

Surprise for a time held the old woman speechless; a look of sorrow and affection drove the querulousness out of her face and voice.

"What ails you, child!" she said, wonderingly. "Do you want to make Mr. Arthur hate me more, and keep you from me entirely? Don't you know, dearie, how he swore that the day I told you these things, he would forbid you to visit me, and if you disobeyed, take you away where I could not even hear of you?"

Tears were in Hagar's eyes, and she held out her wrinkled hands imploringly. "Don't tease your old nurse, dearie; don't. I can't tell you these things now, and they could not make you any happier, child. Wait a little, the time will come ——"

"So will old age, Auntie, and death, and all the knowledge we want, I suppose, when it is too late to make it profitable. Well, Auntie, I will tell you something in exchange for my mother's story, and to make

it easier for you to relate it. But first, will you answer a few questions?—wait, I know what you would say," as the old woman made a deprecating movement, and essayed to speak. "Hear me, now,"

Hagar looked at the girl earnestly for a moment, and then said quietly:

"Go on then, dearie."

"First," pursued Madeline, "my father dislikes me very much; is this the truth?"

Hagar nodded assent.

"He dislikes you because you were always good to me." Here she paused, and

Hagar again nodded.

"Because you were attached to my mother." Again she paused, and again the old woman bowed assent.

"And because"—the girl fixed the eyes of the old nurse with her own—"because you were too familiar with my mother's past, and his, and knew too well the secret of his hatred of me?"

Hagar sat silent and motionless, but Madeline, who had read her answer in the troubled face, continued: "Very good; I knew all this before, and I'll tell you what else I know. I know why Mr. John Arthur hates me!"

Hagar opened her mouth, and shut it again quickly.

"He hates me," pursued Madeline, "because my mother left him her fortune so tied up that he can only use it; never dispose of it. And at his death it reverts to me."

Hagar still looked her amazement, and Madeline condensed the remainder of her force into one telling shot.

"If I would be kind enough to die, he would consider it a great favour. But as I evidently intend to live long, he desires, of course, to see me happy. Therefore he has bargained me in marriage to Amos Adams, for the splendid consideration of a few thousand dollars and the promise of a few thousand more *if I die young!*"

Still the bewildered look rested upon the old woman's face, and still she gazed at the young girl before her. Suddenly, she leaned forward, and taking the fair head between two trembling hands, gazed long at her. As if satisfied at last with her scrutiny, she drew a deep, sighing breath, and leaned back in her chair.

"It's true," groaned Hagar; "it's too true! She has found it out, and my little girl has gone away; my Baby Madeline is become a woman! There was never a coward in all the race, and a Payne never forgave! It has come at last," she wailed, "and now, what will she do?"

Madeline lost not a look nor tone; and when the old woman ceased her rocking and moaning, she suggested, with a half smile:

"Hadn't I better marry old Adams, Auntie, worry them both into untimely graves, and be a rich young widow?"

Hagar gazed at her in silence. And Madeline, taking her hand in her own, said: "Shall I tell you how I discovered all this, Auntie, dear?"

"Yes, child; go on." And she bent upon the girl a look of attention.

Madeline drew close to her side, and briefly related what had transpired while she sat in her favourite tree; not stating, by the bye, how it occurred that she was in the grove at that very opportune time. Hagar's indignation was unbounded, but she continued to gaze at Madeline in a strange, half fearful, half wondering, wholly expectant way, that the girl could not interpret.

"And now, Aunt Hagar," pursued Madeline, seriously, "I want to understand this matter more fully, and I will not say a word of my plans until you have told me what I came to hear. I shall not come to you again for this information; it is surely my right, and time now is precious."

Madeline half rose, seeing that her nurse still rocked dismally and looked irresolute. "I can bide my time, and fight my battles alone, if need be," she continued, coldly. "I won't trouble you again, nurse," turning as if to go.

"Stop, child!" cried Hagar; "let an old woman think. I'll tell you all I can; all I know. Don't turn away from your

old nurse, dearie; her only thought is for your good. Yes; you must not be left in the dark now; sit down, child, sit down." Madeline resumed her seat, and old Hagar, after another season of moaning and rocking, proceeded to relate, with many wanderings from the point, and many interpolations and opinions of her own, the brief, sad story of Mrs. Arthur's married life and early death. Bereft of Hagar's ornamental extras, it was as follows:

Madeline Harcourt, an orphan, and the adopted daughter of a wealthy bachelor uncle, had incurred his displeasure by loving and marrying Lionel Payne, handsome, brave to a fault, with no other wealth than his keen intellect, his unsullied honour, and his loving, manly heart.

Lionel Payne had entered upon the study of law, but circumstances threw in his way certain mysteries that had long been puzzling the heads of the foremost detectives, and the young law student discovered in himself not only a marked taste for the study of mysteries, but a talent that was remarkable. So he gave up his law studies to become a detective. He rose rapidly in his new profession, giving all the strength of his splendid ability to the study of intricate and difficult cases, and became known among detectives, and dreaded among criminals, as "Payne, the Expert."

He had lived two happy years with his young wife, and been six months the proud father of baby Madeline, when he fell a victim to his dangerous pursuit, shot dead by a bullet from the hand of a fleeing assassin.

John Arthur had been a fellow law student with Lionel Payne, and he had followed the career of the young expert with curious interest, being, as much as was possible to his selfish nature, a friend and admirer of the rising young detective. And Lionel Payne, open and manly himself, and seeing no trace of the serpent in the seeming disinterestedness of Arthur, introduced him proudly into his happy home. Arthur was struck by the beauty of the young wife, and became a frequent and welcome visitor.

One day, there came to the office where John Arthur earned his bread reluctantly, as a salaried clerk, the uncle of Madeline Payne. He had come to make a will, in which he left all his possessions to his beloved neice, Madeline, and her heirs for ever after. This was several months before the sudden death of Lionel Payne.

Ten months after she became a widow, Madeline's uncle died. Left alone with her little child, and with no resources but her own efforts, Madeline's mother struggled on, ever the object of the kind watchfulness and unobtrusive care of John Arthur, who professed to adore the child for the sake of the father, and through the baby, Madeline, gradually won his way in the mother's esteem. Mrs. Payne was deeply grateful, and her mother's heart was touched by the devotion of Arthur to her little child. So it came about that, after a time, she gave him her hand and all of her heart that was not buried with Lionel. A little later she learned that her uncle was dead, and she became mistress of a handsome fortune.

Soon came the knowledge that her husband's heart was not all gold, and the suspicion, as well, that her uncle's will and its purport had long been no secret to him. But, partly from force of habit and partly because he was not yet quite hardened, John Arthur kept up his farce of affection for the child. And while his wife awoke to a knowledge of many of his short-comings, she always believed in his love for her little one.

The two elements that were strongest in the nature of John Arthur were selfishness and pride. From his youth up his idols had been gold and self. Born into the world minus that "golden spoon" for which he sighed in youth and schemed in later years, he had ever felt towards said world a half-fledged enmity. As he reached the age of manhood, his young sister was formally adopted by the only surviving relatives of the two, and becoming,

in due course of time and nature, sole possessor of a very nice little fortune, afterwards held her head very high. Later, in consequence of some little indiscretions of her brother at the time when he was set free in the world—the result of the popular superstition held him by that "the world owed him a living"— she held herself aloof from and ignored him completely.

By degrees Mrs. Arthur's eyes became opened to the true character of the man she had married. Moments she had of doubting, and then of fearing that she wronged him too deeply, for her nature was a just one. It was in one of these latter moods that she made her will, before she had become aware that even his love for her little girl was only a well-acted lie; believing her secure of love and care during his life, she made sure that, at his death, her darling should be supplied with all that money could give. She had long been in the fatal toils of that dread destroyer, heart disease, and suddenly, before she had found opportunity for securing her little daughter further, as she had since begun to realise it was needful to do, she was seized with a paroxysm that snapped the frail cord of life.

A short time before her death, she had given into the keeping of old Hagar a package, to be delivered to little Madeline when she should become a woman, and with the express wish that, should John Arthur prove a kind guardian meanwhile, she would burn the journal it contained unread.

Old Hagar now placed in Madeline's hands the package, which was found to contain her mother's most valuable jewels and the tear-stained journal, which the girl seated herself to peruse with sorrowful awe.

The last page being turned, and the sad life of her mother fully revealed, Madeline bowed her head and wept bitterly, heedless of the attempt of old Hagar to comfort her, until the name of her step-father upon the old woman's lips brought her suddenly to her feet, the tears still on her cheeks, but her eyes flashing, and on her countenance a look that might have been a revelation to John Arthur, had that gentleman been there to see. Taking the old woman's hand, and holding it tightly in her own, the girl said:

"Thanks, Auntie, for recalling me. I have no time for tears now. Listen, and don't interrupt me. My poor mother died with a heart filled with fears for my future, left to that man's keeping. At the time of her death, he believed himself her unconditional heir. She feared for her life with him, and her sickness was aggravated in every possible manner by him, and I fully believe that, in intent if not in deed, John Arthur is my *mother's murderer!*"

The old woman's face expressed as plainly as words could do that she shared in this belief. The girl went on, in the same rapid, firm tone:

"He killed the mother for gold, and now he would sell her child. He will fail, and this is but the beginning. As he drove my mother into her grave, I will hunt him into his! He shall suffer all that she suffered, and more! I know where you obtained your independence now, Aunt Hagar; and he hates you doubly because my mother's love provided for you a home and for her child a haven in time of need. It was well. Keep the old cottage open for me, Aunt Hagar. Keep an eye on John Arthur for my sake. Never fear for me, whatever happens. Expect to hear from me at any time, to see me at any moment. Don't answer any questions about me. A thousand thanks for all your love and kindness, Auntie. Good-bye."

Before the old woman could recover from her astonishment, or utter a word, Madeline had kissed her, swiftly taken up the precious package, and was gone! Hagar hastened to the door, but the girl was speeding swiftly down the path, and was quickly lost to view.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" moaned Hagar, seating herself in the doorway; "her father's passion and her mother's pride! Sorrow

and trouble before her, and she all alone; dark, dark, dark: the world against her! Sorrow and trouble—it's in the blood! And she'll never give it up! She'll fight her wrongs to the bitter end. Oh, my precious girl!" and she buried her head in her apron and wept.

The sun's last ray had faded from the highest hill-top. The little birds had folded their wings and hushed their warblings. Dark clouds came sweeping up from the west, and one, heavy and black, passed above the roof of Oakley, bent down and rested there. Hagar, still sorrowing in the doorway, saw and interpreted. Dark days to come to the master of that over-shadowed house. Dreary days and bitter nights—ah, how many, before that cloud should be lifted from over it, or light hearts beat beneath its roof.

"I beg pardon, madame, you appear in trouble; perhaps I intrude?"

It was Lucian Davlin's soft, lazy voice, and that disagreeable half smile lurked about the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"I've had more welcome visitors," said the old woman, with more truth than politeness, and rubbing her eyes with the corner of her apron, "what do you want?"

"Only a small matter of information, which I believe you can give me."

"Well," said Hagar, testily.

"I want to make a few inquiries about Mr. Arthur of Oakley."

"About Miss Madeline, I suppose you mean. I won't tell you a word ——"

"My dear, good woman, I don't ask nor wish any information regarding that young lady—my inquiries solely concern the father. He is said to be wealthy!"

"What is John Arthur or his money to you?" she questioned, eyeing him with much disfavour.

"Nothing whatever," he indifferently replied. "I merely inquire on behalf of a friend."

"I'll throw him off the scent if he does mean Madeline," thought the old woman.

"Well, Mr. whatever your name is, if it will satisfy your friend to know that Mr. John Arthur is master of Oakley, and everybody knows there's no finer property in the state, and that he has a yearly income of ten thousand or more, why, tell him or her so. And you may as well say, at the same time, that he is too stingy and mean to keep the one in repair or spend decently the other. And when he dies," here she suddenly checked herself, "well, when he dies, his heirs, whoever they may be, will inherit all the more, because of his meanness."

"And who, pray, may be his heirs?"

"How should I know who a stingy old reprobate will chose to inherit after him? I think he has a sister somewhere,' but I don't know."

"H'm, thank you, for my friend. Good-night."

Smiling that same Mephistophelian smile, Lucian Davlin sauntered away, apparently satisfied with himself and what was passing in his mind.

"He'll do," he muttered, "and she'll do him. It will be a good thing for her, just now, and very convenient for me into the bargain. Cora's a marvellously fine woman, but little Madeline is fresh as a rose, and a few months of the city will make her sharp enough. Only let me keep them apart, that's all." Satisfaction beamed in his eye and smiled on his lip. "Pretty Madeline will be the envy of half the boulevard.

Now he has neared the trysting tree. "I think I'll just smoke here, and wait for my pretty bird; this is the place and almost the time."

He smoked and he waited, the time came and passed; his cigar expired; the shadows deepened—but still he waited.

And he waited in vain. No light form advanced through the gathering night; no sweet voice greeted him.

The time was far past now: and, muttering an oath, the disappointed lover strode away, and was lost in the night.

Madeline was standing in her own room,

the threshold of which John Arthur had never crossed since the day when a silent form was borne from it and laid in that peaceful home, the churchyard. She had just received the summons, for which, only, she lingered—the command of Mr. Arthur to attend at the altar of hospitality, and pour, for Mr. Amos Adams, the tea.

She was attired in a neat dark garment which was vastly becoming. She had made her toilet with more than usual care, as if, perhaps, to do honour to her ancient suitor—at least so thought Mr. Arthur, when she presented herself before him.

She had put her chiefest treasures in a little, a very little, travelling bag. And now she threw across her arm a large cloak, took her hat, veil and bag, and descended softly to the hall below. It was faintly lighted from the lower end, and Madeline deposited her belongings in a darkened niche near a door, peeped out into the night, that had come on cloudy and starless, and entered the room where waited the two conspirators and supper.

John Arthur was more bland and smiling than Madeline had ever before known him, while as for old Amos, he nearly lost himself in a maze of grins and chuckles, but displayed a very unloverlike appetite, nevertheless, and divided his attention pretty evenly between the beautiful face of Madeline and the viands on the table.

Madeline betrayed no sign of surprise at her step-papa's unwonted cordiality, and no annoyance at the ogling and chuckling of her antiquated suitor. In truth, she favoured him with more than one expressive smile, the meaning of which he little guessed, as she contrasted him once more with handsome Lucian Davlin, and smiled again at the picture of his coming defeat.

The meal was partaken of in comparative silence, all apparently quite satisfied with their own thoughts—ah, how different! It was not until old Jane, the servant, had been dismissed, that Mr. Arthur drew his chair a trifle nearer that of his friend, and leaning his arms upon the table, looked across at Madeline, and said:

"My dear, I believe you are aware of the honour this gentleman desires to confer upon you? I think I have hinted at the truth upon one or two occasions?"

Madeline veiled her too expressive eyes behind their long lashes, but made no reply.

"It is my desire," he continued, surveying with satisfaction the appearance of humility with which his words were received, "and the desire of Mr. Adams as well, that we should come to a satisfactory understanding to-night. We will, therefore, settle the preliminaries at once—this is your desire, I think, Mr. Adams?"

"Oh, certainly! Oh, yes, yes," ejaculated old Amos, in a transport of grins.

"And this will, I trust"—he was growing more stately and polite every moment—"this, of course, is satisfactory to you, Miss Madeline?"

"Perfectly." She looked him full in the face now, and somehow her glance slightly impaired his feeling of dignity and security.

"Very good; and now having formally accepted the proffered hand of Mr. Adams——"

"Pardon me, sir, you are too fast. Mr. Adams has not offered himself."

"Nonsense"—Mr. Arthur suddenly forgot his politeness—"haven't I just stated his offer?"

Madeline leaned back in her chair, and looked from one to the other with a tranquil smile.

"Perhaps; but unfortunately there is a law in existence which prohibits a man from marrying his grandmother, and likewise objects, I believe, to a young woman's espousing her step-papa, however much adored. And as you can't marry me, my dear parent and guardian!—I object to listening to a proposal from your lips."

John Arthur gazed in angry consternation upon the girl's still smiling face, but before the impatient words that he would have uttered could find voice, old Amos,

who had interpreted her smiles as being favourable to himself, came gallantly to the rescue.

"Right! quite right?" he chuckled. "Of course, you know, Arthur—Miss Madeline, ahem—that's what I meant, you know. It's the proper way," he gasped; and the general expression of his countenance did not tend to make his observations the more lucid—"I meant, you know—ah, well—will you honour me, Miss Madeline—by—by your hand, you know?"

This effort of oratory was received with smiling attention by the girl, who now addressed herself entirely to him, without heeding the effect of her words upon her step-father, or his interpolations, as she proceeded.

"Mr. Adams,"—she spoke in a low, even tone, and gradually permitted the real feelings that were seeking for expression to show themselves in her every feature—"Mr. Adams, I think I appreciate *as it deserves* the honour you desire to bestow upon me; believe me, too, when I say that I am as grateful as it is proper I should be. But, Mr. Adams, I am only a mere girl, and you might pay too dearly for me."

"What the deuce does the fool mean?" growled Mr. Arthur.

"I don't dispute the fact that I am a perfectly marketable commodity, and it is very right and proper that my dear step-papa—who dotes on me, whose idol I have been for long years—should set a high valuation upon my unworthy head. Yet this little Arcadian transaction is really not just the thing for the present century and country. And so, Mr. Adams, I must beg leave to thank you for the honour you proffer, and, thanking you, to decline it!"

For a moment no one spoke; there was neither sound nor movement in the room. John Arthur was literally speechless with rage, and old Amos was just as speechless from astonishment; while Madeline gazed from one to the other unmoved. As soon he could articulate, John Arthur confronted her, and taking her roughly by the shoulder, demanded:

"What do you mean, you ungrateful jade? What are you talking about?"

"About your contract in flesh and blood, Mr. Arthur. About your very worthy scheme for putting money in your pockets by making me this man's wife. If I am to be sold, sir, I will make my own bargain; be very sure of that; and *this* is not my bargain!"

"Don't talk to me of bargains, you little idiot! Do you think to defy me? Do you dare to defy me?"

His rage passed all bounds. She put the width of the table between them and surveyed him across it, mockingly.

"Listen, girl, I am your lawful guardian; you shall obey me!"

"Really, now, don't, step-papa; you are actually purple in the face! You might die, you know; think of your heart, do and take a glass of water."

Old Adams collapsed in the remote corner whither he had fled. The miser was not at home in a tempest, and this was already beyond his depth. He gasped in speechless amaze and affright. Was this the girl he had thought to mould as his wife—this fearless, defiant creature? Already he began to congratulate himself upon his lucky escape. "She would murder me some day," he thought, shuddering.

For the time being, John Arthur was a madman. Defied, mocked, by this girl who had been a burden to his very life! He raged, he raved, he cursed; and so raging and raving, he cursed her, and then in vile, bitter words hurled his anathema at her dead mother's memory.

Then the mocking smile was gone, the taunting voice changed its tone; and as it changed, old Amos, cowering in his corner, shuddered afresh. Her whole face underwent a transformation. Her form dilated, she sprang before her step-father and the ring of her voice checked the imprecations on his lips.

"Stop," she cried; "don't add the last drop to your already overfull measure!

Don't double the force of the thunderbolt that will strike you some day! Is it not enough that you have hated me all my life through; that you have loaded down my childhood with unkind words, curses and wishes for my death? Not enough that you follow me with your hatred because my mother's own will be mine at your death? Not enough that you would barter my life—yes, my *life*—for gold, sell my heart's blood for your own ease and comfort? And now must you pollute the name of my mother, as you polluted her life? Never breathe her name again; never *dare* to name her! I, her daughter, tell you that for her every tear, every heart pang, every sigh, *you* shall pay dearly; *dearly!* I will avenge my mother's wrongs some day; for *you are her murderer!*"

John Arthur gazed in speeehless amaze into the space before him—but she was gone! The stern, vengeful, set face was no longer there. The proud, ringing voice was no longer sounding in his ear. The uplifted, warning, threatening hand menaced him only in memory. And before the might of her purpose, and the force of her maledictions, he stood as in a trance.

When he had so far recovered himself as to think of her sudden disappearance, he went out quickly. The entrance door stood wide open; the dim light flickered on an empty hall and stairway; the sky was black with clouds, and never a star; the wind moaned about the house; and across the meadow came the doleful howl of old Hagar's watch-dog.

But Madeline was not to be found.

Always, in the days to come, he remembered her face as it had looked on him that night. Often in dreams he would start and cry out, haunted by the sound of her scornful voice, the spectre of her threatening hand.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DIE IS CAST.

LUCIAN Davlin paced the platform of the Bellair depot, in a very unpleasant frame of mind.

His companion, half servant, half confederate, wholly and entirely a rascal, discerning his mood and, as ever adapting himself to it, had withdrawn to a respect-distance. Only the shine of his cigar, glowing through the darkness, betokened his proximity, or the fact that the dark platform was not in the sole possession of the sullen man who paced its brief length, and questioned the Fate in which he trusted, and which, for once, had played him a sorry trick.

He had been deceived by a mere schoolgirl. She had not even deigned him a farewell word. He had lost a fair prize.

"Gad!" he muttered, biting viciously at his cigar, "to be baffled like this; to lose that little beauty; to be foiled like a moon-struck idiot and never know how or why! I can't write her, with that cursed old step-father to interfere. I can't return again very soon. And she *is* such a little beauty!"

He paused at the end of the darkened platform, and looked down the track; in the direction of the grove where they had met, and of Madeline's home. It was almost time for the train. At the upper end of the platform, the station master flashed his lantern, tumbled the luggage closer to the track and examined the checks critically; while the Man of Tact came out from his retirement and overlooked the proceeding.

Something was coming down the track, swiftly, silently. He could just discern a shape moving toward him. It came nearer, and he moved up a few paces, and turned again where the lantern's rays fell upon him. It came nearer yet and paused in the shadow. It was a woman's form, and it beckoned. He approached carelessly.

"Lucian!" She came close to him,

and placed her hand upon his arm, drawing her breath hard and quick.

He drew her farther into the shadow and clasped his arms about her. "Little one! You have walked fast, how your heart beats! I had given you up. Is it 'good bye,' dear?"

She silently held up the little chatelaine, which he felt rather than saw, and took from her hand. In the darkness, he smiled again the old exultant smile not good to see, and pressing her closer in his arms, said:

"Don't try to talk, sweet one; see, yonder comes our fiery horse and soon we will be far on our way. Take my arm, little one, and trust him who loves you. Look your last at the scene of your past loneliness, to-morrow comes the gay world."

Rattling and shrieking, the train approached. Lucian hurried his companion upon the rear platform; and neither his comrade, who entered the smoking car without looking about him, nor the station master, busy with his trunks and valises, observed that a third passenger quitted Bellair station on the night express.

About them, the passengers nodded, yawned or slept. Outside, swiftly passing darkness. And every moment was hurrying her farther and farther away from all familiar scenes and objects, out to a life all untried, a world all new and strange. But she never thought of this. She was not elated, neither was she cast down. She felt no fear; and, afterwards, she remembered that she indulged in no bright visions of the future during her swift flight.

She had prepared herself to relate her story, to describe the scene she had just passed through, to tell him all. But he had other things to occupy his mind, and bidding her to rest and save all she might have to relate until the morrow, he relapsed into silence and thought, only now and then gently speaking a word, and looking after her comfort with a happy grace possessed by few, and so powerful in the winning of a woman.

On, on, through the black night—youth and age, joy and sorrow, hope and despair, good and evil; on together through the night; on, on. Near to the great city; near to the welcome, dark or bright, awaiting the journey's end. Blacker grew the night, wilder shrieked the wind in angry protest against the defiant, fiery, resistless monster upon whom its rage fell impotent. Now pausing; now rushing on with a shriek and a roar; nearer, nearer to the scene of the new life, dawning grimly upon the fair girl, all unconcious, unheeding.

They halted at a wayside station—just one of those little hamlets only a few miles removed from, and really a part of the great city. One passenger came on board, sauntering down the coach's length listlessly, wearily. He threw himself into a reversed seat in a half reclining attitude, and so his careless, wandering gaze fell first upon Madeline, seated opposite and very near.

She sees him just as she sees the rest, vaguely. She remembers, later, that he had a good face and that she had thought it then. But confused and wearied in mind and body, she feels no inclination to observe or think. So they were hurried on, and no whisper of her heart, no quickening of the pulses, or sensation of joy or fear warned her that she was sitting under the gaze and in the presence of the good and the evil forces that were to compass and shape her life.

Open your eyes, oh, Madeline, before it is too late. See the snare that is spreading beneath your feet; read aright the bright glance that shines on you from those handsome fateful eyes. Interpret truly the smile turned on you now. Alas! what woman ever saw guile in the eyes of the man she loved? Never one, until those eyes have ceased to smile upon her, and her fate is sealed. What one ever yet recognised the false ring of the voice that had never, as yet, addressed her save in honeyed tones, that seemed earth's sweetest music to her ears? None, until the voice had changed and forgotten its love words; none, until it was too late.

What Madeline saw, was a man who was to her the embodiment of all manly grace, her all of joy and love, of truth and trust. And, sitting opposite, just a young man with fair curling hair, and frank blue eyes; with a fine manly face, and an air of refinement. A very nice young man; but not like her hero.

Not like her hero? No, thank heaven for that, Madeline, else your way would have been far more drear, else your life might have known never a ray of sunlight, in the long days to come.

On, on; nearer and yet nearer the long journey's end. Both thinking of her, but how differently!

One pityingly, sadly, fearing for her fate, longing to save her from the precipice which she could not see and still wear that look of sweet trustfulness.

One triumphantly, as of a fair prize gained; a new tribute to his power and strength; another smile from chance; one more proof that he was a favoured one of fortune, and that life ever gave him good things from out the very best.

They are very near their journey's end now, and Lucian Davlin whispers briefly to Madeline, and lounges out to give some necessary directions to the neglected companion of his wanderings.

Hastily the young man opposite rises, and crossing to Madeline bends over her, speaking hurriedly.

"Pardon me, Madame, but are you a stranger to the city?"

"Yes." After giving her answer she wonders why she did it, remembering that it is from a stranger the question comes, and that it is therefore an impertinence.

"I thought as much!" the blue eyes look troubled, and the manly voice hurries on. "The time may come, I hope it will not, when you will need a friend. If so, this card bears my address, take it keep it, and believe me, I speak from honest motives and a desire to serve you."

He drops a card in her lap, and as she makes a gesture of repulsion, he says, entreatingly: "Take it; *in the name of your mother* I ask it."

She snatches up the card impulsively, and looks for one moment straight in his eyes. Then drawing a long sighing breath says, simply: "I will," and turns away as she puts it in her pocket, never so much as glancing at it.

"Thank you." He lifts his hat, and resumes his seat and his former attitude just as Lucian reappears.

Now all was bustle and confusion, the journey's end was reached; and through the hurrying, jostling crowd, past flickering lamps, and sleepy guards, they went under the dusky arches of the mammoth city station, out among the bawling 'bus drivers and brawling hackmen, past them, until a carriage, that seemed to be in waiting for them just beyond the noisy crowd, was reached. Stepping into this, they were about to drive away when, in the shadow, and very near them, Madeline discerned the form of the Unknown of the railway train. Then Lucian gave the order from the carriage window, and they rolled away.

The man in the shadow heard, and stepping into the nearest carriage, repeated the order given by Lucian the moment before, adding: "Quick; don't lose a moment!"

And thus it was that a carriage passed swiftly by that which contained Davlin and his companion, and the flash of their vehicle's lamp showed Madeline the face looking from its window.

Again that face seen in the shadow—how strange, thought she; but her lover was speaking and she forgot all else.

"Darling, I must leave you soon. I came up to-night on a matter of business, and to meet a friend who will leave to-morrow early. I must therefore keep my appointment to-night, late as it is: or rather this morning, for it is midnight and past. You will not be afraid, dear, left alone for a little while in a great hotel?"

"I am not afraid, Lucian, but ——"

"But lonely; is that it? Well, sweetheart, it's only for a little while, and to

morrow I will come for you, and all shall be arranged. We'll have no more separations then. Rest well and at noon to-morrow be ready: I will be with you then. Meantime, your every want will be supplied, and let the morrow find my little treasure bright-eyed and blooming."

"Oh, Lucian, Lucian! how strange this seems. I can't realise it at all."

He laughed lightly. "Not afraid, little one?"

"Not afraid, Lucian, no; but I can't explain or describe my feelings. I suppose I need rest; that is all."

"That is all, depend upon it; and here we are. One kiss, Madeline, the last till to-morrow."

He folded her tenderly in his arms, and then sprang lightly from the carriage.

Up and down, far as the eye could see, the street lamps glittered, and as Madeline stepped from the carriage she observed another roll away. High above her loomed the great hotel, and after midnight though it was, all here was life and bustle. The scene was novel to the half bewildered girl. Clinging to her lover's arm, she entered the reception-room and, sitting opposite the door, saw a form pass in the direction Lucian had taken, as he went to register her name and order for her "all that the house could afford."

"I did not give your real name, because of your step-father, you know." said Lucian, upon his return. "I registered you as Miss Weir, that name being the first to occur to me."

She looked a trifle disturbed, but said nothing. A few words more and a servant appeared.

"To conduct you to your room," said Lucian.

Together they moved towards the door; there he lifted his hat, with profound courtesy, and said in a very audible tone: "Good-night, Miss Weir; I will call to-morrow noon; pleasant dreams."

"To-morrow noon," she echoed.

As she watched his retreating figure, another passed her; a man who, meeting her eye, lifted *his* hat and passed out.

"He again!" whispered the girl to herself; "how very strange."

Alone in her room, the face of this man looked at her again, and sitting down, she said, wearily: "Who is he? what does he mean? His name—I'll look at the card."

Taking it from her pocket, she read aloud: Clarence Vaughan, M.D., No. 430, B—— Street.

"Clarence Vaughan, M.D.," she repeated. "What did he mean? I must tell Lucian to-morrow; to-night I am too weary to think. Search for me, John Arthur; find me if you can! To-morrow—what will it bring, I wonder?"

Weary one, rest, for never again will you sleep so innocently, so free from care as now. Sleep well, nor dream!

She slept. Of the three who had been brought into contact thus strangely, Madeline slept most soundly and dreamed the brighter dreams.

It was the last ray of her sunlight; when the day dawned, her night began.

CHAPTER V.

A SHREWD SCHEME.

An elegant apartment, one of a suite in a magnificent block such as are the pride of our great cities.

Softest carpets, of most exquisite pattern; curtains of richest lace; lambrequins of costly texture; richly-embroidered and velvet-covered sleepy-hollows and lounging chairs; nothing stiff, nothing that did not betoken abandonment to ease and pleasure; downy cushions: rarest pictures; lovliest statuettes; finest bronzes; delicate vases; magnificent full length mirrors a book-case, itself a rare work of art, containing the best works of the best authors, all in the richest of bindings—nothing here that the most refined and cultivated taste could disapprove, and yet everything bespoke the sybarite, the voluptuary. A place wherein to forget that the world held aught save

beauty; a place for luxurious revelry, and repose filled with lotus dreams.

Such was the bachelor abode of Lucian Davlin, as the glowing gas lights revealed it on the dark night of the arrival of this gentleman in the city.

Moving restlessly about, as one who was perfectly familiar with all this glowing richness, only because movement was a necessity to her; trailing her rich dress to and fro in an impatient promenade, and twisting recklessly meantime a delicate bit of lace and embroidery with plump, white fingers—a woman waited and watched for the coming of Lucian Davlin.

A woman, fair of face, hazel-eyed, sunny-haired, with a form too plump to be quite classical, yet graceful and prepossessing in the extreme. A very fair face, and a very wise one; the face of a woman of the world, who knows it in all its phases; who is able, in her own peculiar manner, to guide her life bark successfully if not correctly, and who has little to acquire, in the way of experience, save the art of growing old gracefully and of dying with an acquitted conscience.

No unsophisticated girl was Cora Weston, but a woman of eight-and-twenty; an adventuress by nature and by calling, and with beauty enough, and brains enough, to make her chosen profession prosperous, if not proper.

She paused before a mirror, carefully adjusting her fleecy hair, for even in pressing emergencies such women never forget their personal appearance. This done, she pondered a moment and then pulled the bell. A most immaculate coloured gentleman answered her summons and, bowing low, stood waiting her will.

"Henry, is it no time that your master were here? The train is certainly due; are you sure he will come? What did he telegraph you?"

"That he would arrive on the one o'clock express, madame; and he never fails."

"Very well. If he does not appear soon, Henry, you must go and inquire if the train has been delayed, and if so, telegraph. My business is imperative."

The well trained servant bowed again, and, at a signal from her, withdrew. Left alone, she continued her silent march, listening ever, until at length a quick footstep came down the passage. Flinging herself into the depths of a great easy chair, she assumed an air of listless indifference, and so greeted the new comer.

"Gracious heavens, Cora! what brings you here like this? I thought you had sailed, and was regretting it by this time."

He hurried to her side, and she half rose to return his caress. Then sinking back, she surveyed him with a lazy half smile. "I wonder if you are glad to see me, Lucian, my angel; you are such a hypocrite."

He laughed lightly, and threw himself into a seat near her. "Candid Cora, you are not a hypocrite—with me," and he looked admiringly yet impatiently at her. "Come," he said, at length, as she continued to tap her slender foot lazily, and to regard him silently through half closed lashes: "what does it all mean? Fairest of women, tell me."

"It means, *Mon Brave*, that I did not sail in the *Golden Rose;* I only sent my hat and veil."

"Wonderful woman! Well, thereby hangs a tale, and I listen."

"I came back to see ——"

"Not old Verage?" he interrupted, maliciously.

"No, hush; he saw me safely on board the *Golden Rose*—very gallant of him wasn't it?"

"Rather—yes, considering. And if I did not know Miss Cora Weston so very well, I should be surprised at all this mystery; as it is, I simply wait to be enlightened."

"And enlightened you shall be, monsieur."

She threw off her air of listlessness and arose, crossing over and standing before him, leaning upon a highbacked chair, and speaking rapidly.

Lucian, meantime, produced a cigar case, lit a weed, and assuming the attitude and manner she had just abandoned, bade her proceed.

"You see," she said, "I did not like the idea of quitting the country because of a little difference of opinion between myself and an old idiot like Verage."

"A difference of some thousands out of pocket for him; well, go on."

"Just so, comrade mine. Well, fortune favoured me; she generally does. I learned, at almost the last moment, that a lady of my acquaintance had taken passage in the same vessel. I interviewed her, and found her in the condition of the good people in novels who have seen better days; her exchequer was at low ebb, and, like myself, she had reasons which induced her to emigrate. I did not inquire into these, having no reason to doubt the statement, but I accompanied her on board the *Golden Rose*, bade her a fond farewell, and bequeathed to her my street apparel and a trifling sum of old Verage's money. In exchange, I donned her bonnet and veil, and adopted her rather awkward gait, and so had the satisfaction of seeing, on my return to terra firma, old Verage gazing enraptured after my Paris bonnet and floating veil as it disappeared with my friend, outward bound."

"Well, what next; All the world, your world, supposes you now upon the briny deep. Old Verage will be rejoiced to find you here in the city; what then?"

"I think he will," said Cora, dryly, "when he does find me. I did not come here in the dark to advertise my arrival."

"Bravo, Cora," he patted her hands softly; "wise Cora. You are a credit to your friends, indeed you are, my blonde beauty."

She laughed softly; a kittenish, purring laugh.

"Well, Lucian, time flies and I throw myself on your mercy. Recommend me to some nice quiet retreat, not too far from the city, but at a safe distance; put me in a carriage, at daylight, which will carry me out to some by-station, where I can take passage behind the iron horse, unmolested, for fresh fields and pastures new."

Davlin pondered a moment as if he had not already decided upon his course of action. He knew the woman he had to deal with, and shaped his words accordingly. "A retired spot—let me see. I wonder—by Jove," brightening suddenly, "I think I have the right thing for you."

"Well, when Lucian Davlin 'thinks' he has a point, that point is gained; proceed, man of might."

"You see," began Lucian, in a business-like tone, "I took one of my 'skips' for change of scene and recreation."

"And safe quarters until the wind shifted," interrupted she. "Well, go on,"

He laughed softly. "Even so. We children of chance do need to take flying trips sometimes, but I did not set out for Europe, Cora mine, and I wore my own clothes home."

"Bravo!" But old Verage don't want you, and the wind *has* changed; proceed."

"Well, as usual, I found myself in luck, and if I had been a nice young widow, might have taken Summer quarters in the snug little village of Bellair."

"Not being a widow, relate your experience as a rusticating gentleman at large. You excite my curiosity."

Lucian removed his cigar from between his lips, and lazily contemplated his fair *vis-à-vis*.

"How long a time must elapse before the most magnificent of blondes will think it fitting, safe, and," with a slight smile, "expedient to return and resume her sovereignty here, on this hearth, and," striking his breast theatrically, "in this heart?"

The "most magnificent of blondes" looked first, approvingly, at her image displayed in the full length mirror opposite then coolly at her interrogator.

"Hem! that depends. The lady you so flatter can't abide dullness and inaction; and too much stupidity might overcome her natural timidity, in which case even

my ardent old pursuer could not scare me into submission and banishment. If I could only find an occupation, now, for my ——"

"Peculiar talents," he suggested; "that's just the point. And now, I wonder if you wouldn't make a remarkably charming young widow?"

"So you have an idea, then, Lucian? Just toss me a bunch of those cigarettes, please—thank you. Now a light; and now, if it's not asking too much, will you proceed to explain yourself, and tell me what fortunate being you desire me, in the character of a fair widow, to besiege? What is he like; and why?"

"Admirable Cora! what other woman could smoke a cigarette with such a perfect air of doing the proper thing; so much of Spanish grace."

"And so much genuine enjoyment," she added, comfortably. "Smoke is my poetry, Lucian. When far from my gaze, and I desire to call up your most superb image, I can do so much more comfortably and satisfactorily inspired by my odorous little Perique."

"Blessed Perique! Cora shall have them always. But back to my widow; an absence of six months, perhaps, would be a judicious thing just now, you think?"

"More would be safer," she smiled, "if the Peri can keep aloof from Paradise so long."

"How would the Peri fancy taking up her permanent abode outside the walls of Paradise?"

She removed the fragrant gilded cigar in miniature from between two rosy, pursed-up lips, and surveyed him in mute astonishment.

"Provided," he proceeded, coolly, "provided she found a country home, bank account, and equipage to her liking, with everything her own way, and ample opportunities for trips to Paradise, making visits to her brother and her city friends—and a fine prospect of soon becoming sole possessor of said country mansion, bank, stock, &c.?"

She placed the tiny weed once more between her lips, and sending up perfumed, curling little volumes of smoke, settled herself more comfortably and said, nonchalantly, "That depends; further particulars, please."

It was wonderful how these two understood each other. She knew that he had for her a plan fully matured, and wasting no time in needless questionings, waited to hear the gist of the whole matter, assured from past experience that he would suggest nothing that would be an undertaking unworthy of her talent, and he knew that she would weigh his suggestions while they were being made, and be ready with her decision at the close.

Long had they plotted and prospered together, these two Bohemians of most malevolent type; and successfully and oft played into each other's hands. Never yet had the good fortune of the one been devoid of profit to the other; knowing this, each felt safe in accepting, unquestioned, the suggestions of the other; and because of this, she felt assured now that, in this present scheme, there was something to be gained for him as well as herself.

When the looker-on wonders idly at the strength of ties such as those which bound together these two, and the length of their duration, he has never considered their nature—the similarity of tastes, similarity of pursuits, and the crowning fact of the mutual benefit derived from such association.

Find a man who lives by successful manipulations of the handbook of chance and who bows to the deity of three aces; who finds victims in fortified places, and whose most hazardous scheme is surest of success; who walks abroad the admired of his contemporaries, who envy him his position as fortune's favourite in proportion as they ply their own similar trade near the foot of the ladder of chance; who shows to men the dress and manner of a gentleman, and to the angels the heart of a fiend—and you will find that man aided

and abetted, upheld and applauded, by a woman, his fitting companion by nature or education. She is unscrupulous as he, daring as he, finding him victims that his arm could not reach; plying the finer branch of a dangerous but profitable trade; sharing his prosperity, rescuing from adversity; valued because necessary, and knowing her value therefore fearing no rival.

Cora was beautiful in Davlin's eyes, and secure in his affections, because she was valuable, even necessary, to him. He cared for her because in so doing he was caring for himself, and placing any "card" in her hands was only the surest means of enlarging his own pack. While she, for whether a woman is good or bad she is ever the slave of her own heart, recognizing the fact of the mutual benefit resulting from their comradeship, and improving, in her character of a woman of the world, every opportunity to profit by him, yet she saw in him the one man who possessed her love. Though the life she had led had worn out all the romantic tendencies of her nature, and had turned the "languishing of her eye" into sharp glances in the direction of the main chance, still she lavished upon him the best of her heart, and held his interest ever the equal of her own. After the manner of such, they were loyal to each other.

"Then," pursued Lucian, "listen, and a tale I will unfold."

In his own way, he proceeded to describe the intended victim; his home, his wealth, his state of solitude, together with the facts he had gathered up here and there relative to his leading characteristics and weaknesses, whereby he might be successfully manipulated by skilled hands. The boldness of his plan made even Cora start, and instead of her usually ready decision and answer, she favoured him with a wondering, thoughtful stare.

"You see," concluded Lucian, "he can't live for ever at the worst, and the estate is a handsome one. You could easily make yourself queen absolute of the situation, and go and come at your own sweet will. I think as a good brother I should be a magnificent success, and an ornament to your country mansion in the lazy Summer."

"And if I don't approve of the speculation after a trial, I can commit suicide or vanish," Cora said, meditatingly.

"Just so," laughed he; "and take the spoons."

"You are sure there are no incumbrances; perfectly sure of that?" she questioned.

"Perfectly sure. There was a stepdaughter, but she ran away with some foreigner;" here he smiled, and veiled his eyes, lest she should read aright their expression. "He would not give her a penny, or a crust of bread, were she to return. He hated her from her earliest day; but she is not likely to reappear in any case."

"If she should, you might marry her, you know," she suggested, maliciously.

"So I might," he said, shutting his eyes again; "and we would all settle down into respectable members of society—charming picture. But, jesting aside, how do you like the prospect?"

She tossed away her cigarette and, rising, paced the room in silence for a few moments.

Lucian whistled, softly, a few bars from a favourite opera; then lighted a fresh cigar, and puffed away, leaning lazily back and watching her face furtively out of half closed eyes.

"I think," she said, resuming her seat, "that I will take a nearer view of this 'prospect' of yours."

He nodded his head and waited for her to proceed.

"I think the *rôle* of widow might interest me for a little time, so I'll take myself and my 'delicate constitution' down to your promising haven of rest. I'll 'view the landscape o'er,' and the prospect of an opportunity for a little sharp practice will make my banishment more endurable; of course, my resignation will increase as the situation becomes more interesting."

"Which it is sure to do," he said, rising quickly and crossing to the window. "The thing is as good as done; you always accomplish what you undertake; and you'll find the game worth the powder. The fact is, Cora," he continued, seriously, "you and I have engineered so many delicate little affairs successfully, here in the city, that, as a combination, we are pretty well known just now; too well, in fact, for our own ease and comfort. Your supposed trip to Europe was a lucky thing, and will throw all officiously-interested ones off your track completely. I shall limit my operations here for a time; shall make this merely head-quarters, in fact, and 'prospect,' like yourself, in fresh fields. And now, it being nearly morning, and quite necessary that you should be on your victorious march, let us consider final ways and means."

In a concise, business-like way, they arranged and discussed, the result of the whole being briefly this:

Cora would drive at early dawn to a suburban station, and from thence go by rail to a village midway between the city and her final destination; and there await her luggage, and the arrival of Lucian. He would join her shortly, and proceed with her to Bellair, in his character of brother; see her comfortably settled, and leave her to her new undertaking.

And thus it was that in the grey of morning a veiled lady, sweet-voiced and elegant in manner, stepped from a close carriage at a little way-side station, and sped away at the heels of the iron horse.

And thus it was that Lucian Davlin, reappearing in Bellair and listening in well simulated surprise to the story of the sudden disappearance of John Arthur's step-daughter, effectually put to flight any idea—forming in the brains of the few who knew, or conjectured, that these two had met—that he had aught to do with her mysterious flitting. In truth, none save old Hagar knew of the frequency of their clandestine meetings, and she never breathed to others the thoughts and suspicions that haunted her brain.

And thus it was, too, that Cora Weston in her new *rôle* of languishing widow secluded carefully from the vulgar gaze heard never a word of Madeline's flight And when, later, the fact was revealed to her, none save old Hagar could have named the precise date of the event. So even wise Cora never connected the fate of the unfortunate girl with the doings of Lucian Davlin.

CHAPTER VI.

A WARNING.

EARLY morning in the great city, but the buzz and clamour were fairly under way and the streets as full of busy, pushing elbowing life as if night and silence had never rested above the tall roofs and chimney pots.

With the rattle of the first cartwheel on the pavement, Madeline had started broad awake. As the din increased, and sleep refused to return to the startled senses, all unused to these city sounds, she arose and completing her toilet with some haste seated herself at her window to look out upon the scene so new to her.

What a world of strange emotions passing and repassing beneath her eye! What hopes and fears; what carelessness and heartache! How they hurried to and fro each apparently intent upon his own thoughts and purposes.

She gazed down until her vision wearied of the motley, everchanging, yet ever the same crowd; and then she reclined in the downy depths of a great easy chair, closed her eyes, and thought of Lucian. After all, what meaning had this restless moving throng for her? Only one: Lucian. What was this surging sea of humanity to her save that, because of its roar and clamour they two were made more isolated, therefore nearer to each other?

The morning wore away, and she began to realise how very soon she should be with

her hero, and then no more of separation. Her heart bounded at this thought.

Some one tapped softly at her door. She opened it quickly, thinking only of Lucian. It was not Lucian, however, but a veiled woman who stepped within the room, closing the door as she came.

Madeline fell back a pace, and gazed at the intruder with a look of startled inquiry which was, however, free from fear. She had not thought of it before, it flashed across her mind now that this fact was odd; but in all her morning's ruminations, she had not once thought of the mysterious stranger of the railway episode. Yet now the first words that took shape in her mind, at the entrance of this unexpected visitor, were "Clarence Vaughan, M.D." She almost spoke then.

With a quick, graceful movement, the stranger removed the shrouding veil; and Madeline gazed wonderingly on the loveliest face she had ever seen or dreamed of. It was a pure, pale face, lighted by lustrious dark eyes, crowned by waving masses of dark silky hair; exquisitely moulded features, upon which there rested an expression of mingled weariness and resignation, the look of

"A soul whose experience
Has paralysed bliss."

One could imagine such a woman lifting to her lips the full goblet of life's sparkling elixir, and putting it away with her own hand, lest its intoxicating richness should shut from her senses the fragrance of Spring violets, and dim her vision of the world beyond.

They formed a decided contrast, these two, standing face to face.

One, with the calm that comes only when the storm clouds have swept athwart life's sky, leaving behind marks of their desolating progress, but leaving, too, calm after tempest; after restlessness, repose.

The other, stretching out her hand like a pleased child to woo the purple lightning from the distance, buoyant with bright hopes, with nothing on brow or lip to indicate how that proud head would bear itself after it had been bowed before the passing storm.

"Pardon me," said the lady, in a sweet contralto. "I think I am not mistaken; this is the young lady who arrived last evening, and is registered," she looked full in the girl's eyes, "as Miss Weir?"

Madeline's eyes dropped before that searching gaze, but she answered, simply: "Yes."

"You are naturally much astonished to see me here, and my errand is a delicate one. Since I have seen you, however, I have lost every doubt I may have entertained as to the propriety of my visit. Will you trust me so far as to answer a few simple questions?"

The words of the stranger had put to flight the first idea formed in her mind, namely, that this visit was a mistake. It was intended for her, and now, who had instigated it? She looked up into the face of her visitor and said, with her characteristic frankness of speech:

"Who sent you to me?"

The abruptness of the question caused the stranger to smile.

"One who is the soul of honour and the friend of all woman-kind," she said, with a soft light in her eyes.

Madeline's eyes still searched her face.

"And his name is that," she said, putting the card of Clarence Vaughan upon the table between them.

"Yes; and this reminds me, I have not yet introduced myself. Here is my card."

She placed in the hand of Madeline a delicate bit of cardboard bearing the name, "Olive Girard."

Silence fell between them for a moment, and then Olive Girard spoke.

"Won't you ask me to be seated, and hear what I wish to say, Miss Weir?"

She hesitated over the name, and Madeline, perceiving it, said:

"You think Weir is not my name?"

"Frankly, I do," smiled Mrs. Girard; "but just now the name matters little. Pardon me, but I am more interested in

your face than you name. I came here because it seemed my duty, and to oblige a friend; now I wish to serve you for your own sake, to be your friend, if you will let me."

Still Madeline's brain kept thinking, thinking; and she put her questions rather as commentaries on her own thoughts than as her share in a conversation.

"Why did Mr. Vaughan send you to me?"

They had seated themselves, at a sign from Madeline, and Mrs. Girard drew her chair nearer to the girl as she answered:

"Because he feared for you."

"Because he *feared for me!*" Madeline's face flushed hotly; "feared what?"

"He feared," said Olive Girard, turning her face full upon her questioner, "what I feel assured is the truth, having seen you—simply that you do not know aright the man in whose company you came to this place."

Madeline turned her eyes upon her guest and the blood went slowly out of her face, but she made no reply, and Mrs. Girard, continued:

"I will ask you once more, before I proceed further, do you object to answering a few questions? Of course I am willing to be likewise interrogated," she added, smiling.

Over the girl's face a look was creeping that Aunt Hagar, seeing, could readily have interpreted. She nodded her head, and said briefly: "Go on."

"First, then," said her interrogator, "are you entirely without friends in this city? Except, of course," she added, quickly, "your escort of last night."

"Yes." Madeline's countenance never altered, and she kept her eyes fully fixed on her companion's face.

"Are—are you without parents or guardian?"

"Yes."

"As I thought; and now, pardon the seeming impertinence of this question, did you come here as the companion of the man who was your escort, or did mere accident put you under his charge?"

"The 'accident' that put me in the charge of Mr. Davlin was—myself," said the girl, in a full, clear voice. "And he is my only guardian, and will be."

Olive Girard pushed back her chair, and rising, came and stood before her, with outstretched hand and pleading, compassionate eyes.

"Just as I feared," she sighed; "the very worst. My poor child, do you know the character and occupation of this man?"

Madeline sprang to her feet, and putting one nervous little hand upon the back of the chair she had occupied, moved back a pace, and said, in a low, set tone:

"If you have come to say aught against Lucian Davlin, you will find no listener here. I am satisfied with him, and trust him fully. When I desire to know more of his 'character and occupation,' I can learn it from his own lips. What warrant had that man," pointing to Clarence Vaughan's card, "for dogging me here, and then sending you to attempt to poison my mind against my best friend? I tell you I will not listen!"

A bright spot burned on either cheek, and the little hand resting on the chair back clinched itself tighter.

Olive Girard drew a step nearer the now angry girl, and searched her face with grave eyes.

"If I said you were standing on the verge of a horrible precipice, that your life and soul were in danger, would you listen then?" she asked, sternly.

"No," said Madeline, doggedly, drawing farther away as she spoke; "not unless I saw the danger with my own eyes. And in that case I should not need your warning," she added, dryly.

"And when your own eyes see the danger, it will be too late to avert it," said Olive, bitterly. "I know your feeling at this moment, and I know the heartache sure to follow your rashness. *What are you, and what do you hope or expect to be, to the man you call Lucian Davlin?* She spoke his name as if it left the taste of poison in her mouth.

The girl's head dropped until it rested on the hands clasped upon the chair before her: cold fingers seemed clutched upon her heart. Across her memory came trooping all his love words of the past, and among them—she remembered it now for the first time—among them all, the word *wife* had never before been uttered. In that moment, a thought new and terrible possessed her soul; a new and baleful light seemed shining upon the pictures of the past, imparting to each a shameful, terrible meaning. She uttered a low moan like that of some wounded animal, and suddenly uplifting her head, turned upon Olive Girard a face in which passion and a ague terror were strangely mingled.

"What are you saying? What are you *daring* to say to me!" she ejaculated, in tones half angry, half terror-stricken, wholly pitiful. "What horrible things are you trying to torture me with?"

She would have spoken in indignation, but the new thought in her heart frightened the wrath from her voice. She dared not say "I am to be his wife," with these forbodings whispering darkly within her.

She turned away from the one who had conjured up these spectres, and throwing herself upon a couch, buried her face in the cushions, and remained in this attitude while Olive answered her and for long moments after; moments that seemed hours to both.

Olive's eyes were full of pity, and her tone was very gentle. Her woman's quick instinct assured her that words of comfort were of no avail in this first moment of bitter awakening. She knew it were better to say all that she deemed it her duty to say, now, while her hearer was passive; and stepping nearer the couch, she said:

"Dr. Vaughan, who saw you in the company of a man so well known to him that to see a young girl in his society he knew could mean no good, came to me this morning with a brief account of your meeting of last night. He is too good a physiognomist not to have discovered, readily, that you were not such a woman as could receive no contamination from such as Lucian Davlin. He feared for you, believing you to be another victim to his treachery. Your coming to this hotel assured him that you were safe for the time, at least, and this being a subject so delicate that he, a stranger, feared to approach you with it, he desired me to come to you, and in case his fears were well founded, to save you if I could. My poor, poor child, you have cast yourself upon the protection of a professional gambler; a man whose name has been associated for years with that of a notorious and handsome adventuress. If he has any fear or regard for anything, it is for her, and your very life would be worth little could she know you as her rival. Judge if such a man can have intentions that are honourable, where a young, lovely and unsophisticated girl like yourself is concerned."

She paused here but Madeline never stirred.

"Come with me," continued Olive, drawing a step nearer the motionless girl; "accept me as your protector, for the present, at least. Believe me, I know what you are suffering now, and near at hand you will find that which will aid you to forget this man.

Madeline slowly raised herself to a sitting posture and turned towards the speaker a face colourless as if dead, but with never a trace of a tear. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, and her lips were compressed, as if she had made, and was strong to keep, some dark resolve.

"What is it that I am to find?" she said, in a low, intense tone.

"A girl, young as you, and once as beautiful," replied Olive, sadly, "who is dying of a broken heart, and her destroyer is Lucian Davlin.

Madeline gazed at her absently for a moment. "I suppose I had ought to hate you," she said, wearily; "you have made my life very black. Lucian Davlin will soon be here—will you please go?

"Surely you are going with me?" said Olive, in amaze.

"No."

"You doubt me? Oh, I have made you feel your danger! You think I am an imposter!"

"No," said the girl, in the same quiet tone, "something here," putting her hand upon her bosom, "tells me that you are sincere. My own heart has abandoned me: it will not let me doubt you, much as I wish to. I cannot thank you for making my heart ache, please go."

Still with that air of unnatural calm, she arose and walked to the window.

Of the two, Olive Girard was by far the more agitated. "Tell me," she said, in eager entreaty, "oh, tell me, you are not going with *him?*

Madeline turned sharply around. "I shall not add myself to the list of his victims," she said, briefly.

And then the two gazed at each other in silence for a moment.

"This is madness," said Olive, at length. "What rash thing do you meditate? I will not leave you to face this man alone, I dare not do it."

Madeline came from the window and stood directly before her. "I am not the weak child you think me. You can do nothing but harm by remaining here. I will meet Lucian Davlin, and part with him in my own way," she said, between her teeth.

Olive saw, in the set face, and stern eye, that she was indeed dealing with a character stubborn as death, and devoid of all fear. She dreaded to leave her thus, but she felt assured that she could nothing else.

"Will you come to me afterward?" she asked. "You have no friends here, you tell me, and you need a friend now. Promise me this and I will go."

"Thank you," said the girl, wearily, "at least I promise to go to no one else; good-bye.'

Turning away, she resumed her position at the window, and never looked once at Olive after that.

"I will write my address on this card," said Olive. She did so, then turning on the girl a look full of pitying tenderness, said: "I need not tell you to be brave; I should rather bid you be cautious. Remember, your life is worth more than the love and loss of such a man. Put this behind you, and come to me soon, believing that you are not friendless."

She lowered her veil and, casting one more wistful glance at the silent figure by the window, went out and closed the door softly.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRUGGLE FOR MORE THAN LIFE.

It is a fortunate provision of Providence that calamity comes upon us, in most cases, with a force so sudden and overwhelming that it is rather seen than felt. As we realize the full torture of an ugly wound, not when the blow is struck, but after the whole system has been made to languish under its effects, so a blow struck at the heart cannot make itself fully felt while the mind is still unable to picture what the future will be like now that the grief has come. We only taste our bitterest grief when the mind has shaken itself aloof from the present woe, to travel forward and question what the future can hold for us, now that our life is bereft of this treasure.

Madeline's condition, after the departure of Olive Girard, was an exponent of this truth. Fast and hard worked her thoughts, but they only encountered the ills of the present, and never glanced beyond.

She had set her lover aloft as her ideal the embodiment of truth, honour and manhood. He had fallen. Truth, honour, manhood, had passed out of existence for her. And she had loved him so well! She loved him even yet.

The thought brought with it a pang of terror, and as if conjured up by it, the scenes of the day previous marshalled themselves again for review. Could it be

possible? Was it only yesterday that she listened to his tender love words, beneath the old tree in Oakley woods? Only yesterday that her step-father was revealed in all his vileness—his plots, his hopes, his fears. Her mother's sad life laid bare before her; Aunt Hagar's story; her defiance of the two men at Oakley; her flight; Clarence Vaughan; the strange, great city; Olive Girard; and now—now, just a dead blank, with no outlook, no hope.

And was this all since yesterday?

What was it, she wondered, that made people mad? Not things like these; she was calm, very calm. She *was* calm; too calm. If something would occur to break up this icy stillness of heart, to convulse the numbed powers of feeling, and shock them back into life before it was too late.

She waited patiently for the coming of her base lover, lying upon the soft divan, with her hands folded, and wondering if she would feel *much* different if she were dead.

When the summons came, at last, she went quietly down to greet the man who little dreamed that his reign in her heart was at an end, and that his hold upon her life was loosening fast.

When Madeline entered the presence of Lucian Davlin, she took the initiatory step in the part she was henceforth to play. And she took it unhesitatingly, as if dissimulation was to her no new thing. Truly, necessity, emergency, is the mother of much besides "invention." Entering, she gave him her hand with a free grace, and smiled up at him as he bade her good-morning.

He remarked on her pale cheeks, but praised the brightness of her eyes, and accepted her explanation that the bustle and the strangeness was unusual to her, as a natural and sufficient reason for the pallor.

"You will soon grow accustomed to that," he said, as they descended to the carriage "and be the rosiest, fairest little woman on the boulevard, for I mean to drive half the men jealous by taking you there often."

Madeline made no reply, and they entered the carriage.

Davlin was not surprised at her silence; he was prepared for a little coyness; in fact, for some resistance, and expected to have occasion for the specious eloquence always at his command. Of course, the result would be the same, he had no doubt of that, and so in silence they reached their destination.

Up a broad flight of stairs, and then a door. Lucian rings, and an immaculate coloured servant appears, who seems as well bred as an English baronet, and who expresses no surprise at the presence of a lady there.

Up another flight of softly carpeted stairs, across a wide hall, and lo! the abode of the sybarite, the apartments of the disciple of Chance.

"Welcome to your kingdom, fair queen," says Lucian, as they enter. "This is your abiding place, for a time, at least, and I am your slave for always," and he kneels playfully before her.

Madeline turns away, and, finding it easiest to do, in her then state of mind, begins a careless tour of the rooms, making a pretence of criticism, and finding in even this slow promenade some relief from absolute quiet and silence.

She guarded her face lest it should display too much of that locked, sullen calm underneath, and replied by an occasional word and nod to his running comments upon the different articles undergoing examination. Fingering carelessly the rare ornaments upon a fine set of brackets, her eye rested upon an elegant little gold mounted pistol. She turned away quickly, and they passed to other things.

Her replies became more ready, and she began questioning gravely about this or that, listening with child-like wonder to his answers, and winning him into a pleasant bantering humour.

Finally he threw himself upon a chair, and selecting a cigar proceeded to light it.

Madeline continued to flit from picture to statuette, questioning with much apparent interest. At last, she paused again before the bracket which held the tiny toy that had for her a fascination.

"What a pretty little pistol," she said. "Is it loaded?"

"I don't know," replied he, lazily. "Bring it to me; I will see."

He was inwardly wondering at her cool acceptance of the situation; and felt inclined to congratulate himself. Seeing her look at the little weapon doubtfully, he laughed and strode to her side, taking it in his hand.

"It is not loaded," he said. "Did you ever fire a pistol?"

"No; show me how to hold it."

He placed it in her hand, and showed her how to manipulate the trigger, and to take aim.

"I should like to see it loaded," she said, at last.

"And so you shall."

He smiled, and crossing the room took from a little inlaid box a handful of cartridges. Madeline watched him attentively, as he explained to her the operation of loading. At length expressing herself satisfied, and declining his invitation to try and load it herself, she turned away.

Davlin extracted the cartridge from the pistol, and returned it to its place, saying: "You might wish to practice at aiming, and won't want it loaded."

"I shall not want much practice," she replied.

A rap at the door, and the servant announced that dinner was come.

"I ordered our dinner here, to-day," explained Lucian, thinking it would be more cosy, "You may serve it, Henry," to the servant.

Dinner was accordingly served, and Lucian found occasion to criticise, very severely, the manner of his serving man. More than once, his voice took on an intolerant tone.

Sitting opposite, Madeline saw the man as he stood behind his master's chair, dart upon him a look of hatred. Her lips framed a smile quite new to them; and, after dessert was placed upon the table and the man dismissed, she said:

"You don't like your servant, I judge?"

"Oh, he's as good as any," replied Lucian, carelessly. "They are pretty much alike, and all need a setting back occasionally; on general principles, you know.

"I suppose so," assented Madeline, in differently, as if the subject had lost all interest for her.

"Slowly the afternoon wore on, moments seeming hours to the despairing girl. At length, Lucian, finding her little inclined to assist him in keeping up a conversation, said:

"I am selfish not to remember that you are very tired. I will leave you to solitude and repose for a little time shall I?"

"If you wish," she replied, wearily, "I suppose I need the rest."

'Then I will look in upon some of my friends. I have almost lost the run of city doings during my absence. Meantime, ring for anything you may need, won't you?"

"I will ring;" and she looked, not at him, but at the bracket beyond.

"Then good-by, little sweetheart. It is now four; I will be with you at six."

He embraced her tenderly, and went out with that *debonnair* grace which she had so loved. She looked after him with a hungry, hopeless longing in her eyes.

"Oh, why does God make His foulest things the fairest?" she moaned. "Why did He put love in our hearts if it must turn our lives to ashes? Why must one be so young and yet so miserable? Oh, mother, mother, are all women wronged like us?"

Madeline arose and commenced pacing

the floor restlessly, nervously. She had come here with no fixed purpose, nothing beyond the indefinite determination to defy and thwart the man who had entrapped her. She had never for a moment feared for her safety, or doubted her ability to accomplish her object.

A plan was now taking shape in her mind, and as she pondered, she extended her march, quite unthinkingly, on into the adjoining room, the door of which stood invitingly open. The first object to attract her attention was the light travelling coat which Lucian had worn on the previous day; worn when he was pleading his suit under the trees of Oakley; and in a burst of anger, as if it were a part of him she was thinking of so bitterly, she seized and hurled it from her. As it flew across the room, something fell from a pocket, almost at her feet.

She looked down at it; it was a telegram, the one, doubtless, that had called him back to the city the day before. A business matter, he had said. Into her mind flashed the words of Olive Girard, "a professional gambler." She would see what this "business" was. Stooping, she picked up the crumpled envelope, and quickly devoured its contents.

"Must see you immediately. Come by first train; am waiting at your quarters.

"CORA."

Madeline went back to the lighter, larger room, and seating herself, looked about her. Again the words of Olive rung in her ears.

"Cora!" she ejaculated. "He obeyed her summons, and brought *me* with him. And she was here only last night—and where has she gone? This must be the 'notorious, the 'handsome.' Ah, Lucian Davlin, this is well; this nerves me for the worst! I shall not falter now. This is the first link in the chain that shall yet make your life a burden."

She crossed the room and touched the bell.

"Now for the first real step," said Madeline, grimly.

The door opened and the dark face of Henry appeared, bowing on the threshold.

"Come in, Henry, and close the door," said Madeline, pleasantly. "I want you to do me a favour, if you will."

Henry came in, and stood waiting her order.

"Will you carry a note for me, Henry, and bring me back an answer? I want *you* to take it, because I feel as if I could trust you. You look like one who would be faithful to those who were kind to you."

"Thank you, lady; indeed I would," said the man, in grateful tones.

Madeline was quick to see the advantage to be gained by possessing the regard and confidence of this man, who must, necessarily, know so much that it was desirable to learn of the life and habits of him, between whom and herself must be waged a war to the very death.

She reasoned rapidly, and as rapidly arrived at her conclusions. The first of these was, the Lucian Davlin, by his intolerance and unkindness, had fitted a tool to her hand, and she, therefore, as a preliminary step, must propitiate and win the confidence of this same tool left by his master within her reach.

"And will you carry my letter, Henry, and return with an answer as soon as you can? You will find the person at this hour without any trouble."

"Master ordered me to attend to your wants," replied the man, in a somewhat surly tone.

She understood this sombre inflection, and said: "He 'ordered' you? Yes, I see; is your master always as hard to please as to-day, Henry? He certainly was a little unkind."

"He's always the same, madame," said the man, gloomily. Her words brought vividly before his mind's eye the many instances of his master's unkindness.

"I'm sorry he is not kind to you," said the girl, hypocritically. "And I don't want you to carry this letter because he

ordered you. I want you to do it to oblige *me*, Henry, and it will make me always your friend."

Ah, Henry, one resentful gleam from your eyes, as you stood behind the chair of your tyrant, has given to this slight girl the clue by which to sway you to her will. She was smiling upon him, and the man replied in gratitude:

"I'll do anything for you, madame,"

"Thank you, Henry. I was sure I could trust you. Will you get me some writing material, please?"

Henry crossed to the handsome davenport, and found it locked. But when taking this precaution, Davlin overlooked the fact that Cora's last gift—a little affair intended for the convenience of travellers, being a combined dressing-case and writing-desk, the dividing compartment of which contained an excellent cabinet photograph of the lady herself, so enshrined as to be the first thing to greet the eyes of whosoever should open the little receptacle—was still accessible.

Failing to open the davenport, Henry turned to this; and pressing upon the spring lock, exposed to the view of Madeline, standing near, the pictured face of Cora. Spite of his grievances, the sense of his duty was strong upon him, and he put himself between the girl and the object of her interest. Not so quickly but that she saw, and understood the movement. Stepping to his side, she put out her hand, saying:

"What an exquisite picture—Madame Cora, is it not, Henry?"

She was looking him full in the eyes, and he answered, staring in astonishment the while, "Yes, miss."

"She is very handsome," mused the girl, as if to herself; "left just before my arrival, I think?" she added, at a venture.

Again her eyes searched his face, and again he gave a surprised assent.

"Do you like her, Henry?" questioned she, intent on her purpose.

"She is just like *him*," he said, jerking his head grimly, while his voice took again a resentful tone. "She thinks a man who is *black* has no feelings."

He placed pen, ink and paper on the table as he answered, and then looked to her inquiringly.

"You may wait here while I write, if you will," she said, and took up the pen

She had brought away from the G—— House the two cards of her would-be friends, and she now consulted them before she asked.

"No. 52 —— street; is that far, Henry?"

"It's a five minutes' walk," he answered. "I can go and come in twenty minutes, allowing time for an answer.

"Very good," she said abruptly, and wrote rapidly:

CLARENCE VAUGHAN.

No. 52 —— street.

"SIR,—Having no other friend at hand, I take you at your word. I need your aid to rescue me from the power of a bad man Will you meet me, with a carriage, at the south corner of this block in one hour, and take me to Mrs. Girard, who has offered me a shelter? You *know* the danger I wish to escape. Aid me '*in the name of your mother.*'

"MADELINE 'WEIR.'"

This is what she penned, and looking up she asked: "What is the number of this place, Henry?"

"91, Empire block," he replied; "C—— street."

She added this, and then folding and enclosing, addressed it to Clarence Vaughan, M.D., etc.

"There, Henry, take it as quickly as you can; and some day I will try and reward you."

She smiled upon him as she gave him the letter. He took it, bowed low and hurried away.

She listened until the sound of his footstep could be heard no longer. Then rising quickly, she opened the receptacle that held the portrait of the woman who, though unseen, was still an enemy. Long she gazed upon the pictured face, and when at last she closed the case, springing the

lock with a sharp click, she muttered between set teeth:

"I shall know *you* when I see you, madame."

Crossing to the pistol bracket, she took the little weapon in her hand, and picking up one of the cartridges left by its careless owner, loaded it carefully. Having done this she placed the weapon in her pocket.

She paced to and fro, to and fro; nothing would have been harder for her than to remain quiet then. Her eyes wandered often to the tiny bronze clock on the marble above the grate.

Ten minutes; her letter was delivered, was being answered perhaps—fifteen; how slowly the moments were going—twenty; what if *he* should return, too soon? Instinctively she placed her hand upon the pocket holding the little pistol. Twenty-five minutes; what if her messenger should fail her? And that card had clearly stated "office hours three to five." Twenty-six; oh, how slow, how slow—twenty-seven; had the clock stopped? no; —twenty-eight—nine—half an hour.

Where was Henry?

She felt a giddiness creeping over her; how close the air was. Her nerves were at their utmost tension; another strain upon the sharply strung chords would overcome her. She felt this vaguely. If she should be baffled now! She could take fresh heart, could nerve herself anew, if aid came to her, but if *he* should come she feared, in her now half frenzied condition, to be alone, she was so strangely nervous, so weak!

How plainly she saw it, the face of Clarence Vaughan. Oh, it *was* a good face! When she saw it again she could rest. She had not felt it before, but she did need rest sorely.

Thirty-five minutes—oh, they had been hours to her; weary, weary time!

How many a sad watcher has reckoned the flying moments as creeping hours, while sitting lonely, with heavy eyes, trembling frame, and heart almost bursting with its weight of suspense—waiting.

Forty minutes—and a footstep in the passage! Her heart almost stopped beating. It was Henry.

"I had to wait, as he was busy with a patient," said he, apologetically, handing her the letter she desired.

Madeline tore open the missive with eager fingers, and read:

MISS MADELINE W.;

Thank you for your faith in me. I will meet you at the place and time appointed. Do not fail me. Respectfully,

C. VAUGHAN.

She drew a long breath of relief,

"Thank you, Henry. Now I shall leave this place; promise me that you will not tell your master where I went or how. Will you promise?"

"I will miss," said the man, earnestly. "Is this all I can do?"

"If you would be my true friend—if I might trust you Henry—I would ask more of you. But I should ask you to work against your master. He has wronged me cruelly, and I need a friend who can serve me as you can quite easily. I should not command you as a servant, but ask you to aid me as a true friend, for I think your heart is whiter than his."

And Henry was won. Starting forward he exclaimed:

"He treats me as if I were a dog; and you, as if I were white and a gentleman! Let me be your servant, and I will be very faithful; tell me what I can do."

"Thank you, Henry; I will trust you. To-morrow, at noon, call at Dr. Vaughan's office and he will tell you where you can find me. Then come to me. You can serve me best by remaining with your master, at present; and I will try, after I have left this place, to reward you as you deserve."

"I will obey you, mistress," said the delighted servant. "I shall be glad to serve where I can hear a kind word. And I shall be glad to help you settle accounts with *him*. I will be there to-morrow, no fear for me."

She turned, and put on her wrappings

with a feeling of exultation. He would come soon, smiling and triumphant, and she would not be there! He should fret and wonder, question and search, but when they met again the power should be on her side.

She turned to the waiting servant, saying: "I am ready, Henry."

He opened the door as if for a princess. Before Madeline had lifted her foot from the carpet, her eyes became riveted upon the open doorway.

There, smiling and *insouciant*, stood *Lucian Davlin!*

Madeline stood like one in a nightmare, motionless and speechless. Again, and more powerfully, came over her senses that insidious, creeping faintness; that sickening of body and soul together.

It was not the situation alone, hazardous as it certainly was, which filled her with this shuddering terror; it was the feeling that vitality had almost exhausted itself. She suddenly realised the meaning of the awful lethargy that seemed benumbing her faculties. The "last straw" was now weighing her down, and, standing mute and motionless she was putting forth all her will power to comprehend the situation, grasp and master it.

Like a dark stone image Henry stood, his hand upon the open door, his eyes fastened upon the man blocking the way.

Davlin, whose first thought had been that the open door was to welcome his approach, realised in an instant as he gazed upon Madeline, that he was about to be defied. There was no mistaking the expression of the face, so white and set. He elevated his eyebrows in an elaborate display of astonishment.

"Just in time, I should say," removing his hat with mock courtesy, and stepping across the threshold. "Not going out without an escort, my dear? Surely not. Really, I owe a debt of gratitude to my friends down town, for boring me so insufferably, else I should have missed you, I fear."

No answer; no change in the face or attitude of the girl before him.

"Close that door, sir, and take yourself off," he said, turning to Henry.

Remembering her words, "You can serve me best here," Henry bowed with unusual humility, and went out.

"I don't think she is afraid of him," he muttered, as he went down the hall; "anyhow, I won't be far away, in case she needs me."

Lucian Davlin folded his arms with insolent grace, and leaning lazily against the closed door, gazed, with his wicked half smile, upon the pale girl before him.

Thus for a few moments they faced each other, without word. At length she broke the silence. Advancing a step, she looked him full in the face and said, in a calm, even tone:

"Open that door, sir, and let me pass."

"Phew—w—w!" he half whistled, half ejaculated, opening wide his insolent eyes. "How she commands us; like a little empress, by Jove! Might the humblest of your adorers be permitted to ask where you were going, most regal lady?"

"Not back to the home I left for the sake of a gambler and *roué*," she said bitterly.

"Oh," thought he, "she has just got her ideas awakened on this subject: believed me the soul of honour, and all that. Only a small matter this, after all."

"Don't call hard names, little woman," he said aloud. "I'm not such a very bad man, after all. By the way, I shouldn't have thought it exactly in your line, to order up my servant for examination in my absence."

"I am not indebted to your servant for my knowledge concerning you, sir. I wish to leave this place; stand aside and let me pass."

The red flush had returned to her cheeks, the dangerous sparkle to her eyes; her courage and spirits rose in response to his sneering pleasantries. Her nerves were tempered like steel. He little

dreamed of courage, strength and power she could pit against him.

He dropped one hand carelessly, and inserted it jauntily in his pocket.

"Zounds; but you look like a little tigress," he exclaimed, admiringly. "Really, rage becomes you vastly, but it's wearisome, after all, my dear. So drop high tragedy, like a sensible girl, and tell me what is the meaning of this new freak."

"I will tell you this, sir; I shall leave this place now, and I wish never to see your face again. Where I go is no concern of yours. Why I go, I leave to your own imagination."

"Bravo; what a little actress you would make! but now for a display of my histrionic talents. Leave this place, against my will, you cannot; and I wish to see your face often, for many days to come. Where you go I must go too; and why you go, is because of a prudish scruple that has no place in the world you and I will live in."

"The world *you* live in is not large enough for me too, Lucian Davlin. And you and I part, now and forever."

"Not so fast, little one," he answered, in his softest, most persuasive tone. "See, I am the same lover you pledged yourself to only yesterday. I adore you the same as then; I desire to make you happy just the same. You have put a deep gulf between yourself and your home; you cannot go back; you would go out from here to meet a worse fate, to fall into worse hands. Come, dear, put off that frown"

He made a gesture as if to draw her to him. She sprang away, and placing herself at a distance, looked at him over a broad, low-backed chair, saying:

"Not a step nearer, sir, and not another word of your sophistry. I will not remain here. Do you understand me? *I will not!*"

Lucian dragged a chair near the door, and throwing himself lazily into it, surveyed the enraged girl with a look of mingled astonishment, amusement and annoyance.

"Really, this is rather hard on a fellow's patience, my lady. Not a step nearer the door, my dear; and no more defiance if you please. You perceive I temper my tragedy with a little politeness," he added, parenthetically. "I will not permit you to leave me; do you hear me? *I will not!*"

His tone of aggressive mockery was maddening to the desperate girl. It lent her a fresh, last impulse of wild, defiant energy. There was not the shadow of a fear in her mind or heart now. The rush of outraged feeling took full possession of her, and for a second, deprived her of all power of speech or action. In another instant she stood before him, her eyes blazing with wrath, and in her hand, steadfast and surely aimed, a tiny pistol—his pistol, that he had taught her to load and aim not two short hours before!

He was not a coward, this man; and rage at being thus baffled and placed at a disadvantage by his own weapon, drove all the mockery from his face.

He gave a sudden bound.

There was a flash, a sharp report, and Lucian Davlin reeled for a moment, his right arm hanging helpless and bleeding. Only for a moment, for as the girl sprang past him, he wheeled about, seized her with his strong left arm, and holding her close to him in a vice-like clutch, hissed, while the ghastly paleness, caused by the flowing blood overspread his face:

"Little demon! I will kill you before I will lose you now! You—shall—not—esca——"

A deathly faintness overcame him, and he fell heavily; still clasping the girl, now senseless like himself.

Hearing the pistol shot, and almost simultaneously a heavy fall, Henry hurried through the long passage and threw open the door. One glance sufficed, and then he rushed down the stairs in frantic haste.

Meantime, Clarence Vaughan, punctual to the time appointed, had driven rapidly

to the spot designated by Madeline. He was about to alight from the carriage, when he drew back suddenly, and sat in the shadow as a man passed up the street.

It was Lucian Davlin, and he entered the building bearing the number Madeline had given in her note.

Instantly Vaughan comprehended the situation. She had sent for aid in this man's absence, and his return might frustrate her plans. Pondering upon the best course to pursue, he descended from the carriage, and paced the length of the block. Turning in his promenade, his ear was greeted by a pistol shot. Could it come from that building? It sounded from there certainly. It was now five minutes past the time appointed; could it be there was foul play? He paused at the foot of the stairs, irresolute.

Suddenly there was a rush of feet, and Henry came flying down, the whites of his eyes looking as if they would never resume their natural proportions. Clarence intercepted the man as he essayed to pass, evidently without having seen him.

"Oh, sir!—Oh, doctor, come right up stairs, quick, sir," he exclaimed.

"Was that shot from here, my man?' inquired Doctor Vaughan, as he followed up the stairs.

"Yes, sir," hurrying on.

"Any people in the building besides your master and the lady?"

"No, sir; not at this time. This way, sir."

He threw open the door and stepped back. Entering the room, this is what Clarence Vaughan saw:

Lying upon the floor in a pool of blood, the splendid form of Lucian Davlin, one arm dripping the red life fluid, the other clasping close the form of a beautiful girl. His eyes were closed and his face pallid as the dead. The eyes of the girl were staring wide and set, her face expressing unutterable fear and horror, every muscle rigid as if in a struggle still. One hand was clenched, and thrown out as if to ward off that death-like grasp, while the other clutched a pistol, still warm and smelling of powder.

It was the work of a moment to stop the flow of blood, and restore the wounded man to consciousness. But first he had removed the insensible girl from Davlin's grasp, laid her upon a bed in the inner room, and, removing the fatal weapon from her hand, instructed Henry how to apply the remedies a skilful surgeon has always about him, especially in the city.

At the first sure symptoms of slowly returning life, Doctor Vaughan summoned Henry to look after his master, whom he left, with rather unprofessional alacrity, to attend to the fair patient in whose welfare he felt so much interest. As he bent over the still unconscious girl, his face was shadowed with troubled thought. She was in no common faint, and feeling fully assured what the result would be, he almost feared to see the first fluttering return of life.

At last a shudder agitated her form, and looking up with just a gleam of recognition, she passed into another swoon, thence to another. Through long weary hours she only opened her eyes to close them, blinded with the vision of unutterable woe; and so the long night wore away.

Dr. Vaughan had given brief, stern orders, in accordance with which Lucian Davlin had entrusted his wound to another surgeon for dressing, and then, still in obedience to orders, had swallowed a soothing potion and betaken himself to other apartments.

Henry had summoned a trusty nurse well known to Clarence Vaughan to assist him at the bedside of Madeline.

In the gray of morning, pallid and interesting, with his arm in a sling, Lucian re-appeared in the sick room. Evidently he had not employed all the intervening time in slumber, for his course of action seemed to have been fully matured.

"She won't be able to leave here for many days, I should fancy?" he half inquired in a low tone, sinking languidly

into a sleepy hollow, commanding a view of the face of the patient, and the back of the physician.

"Not alive," was the brief but significant answer.

"Not alive! Great heavens, doctor, don't tell me that my miserable accident will cost the little girl her life?"

"Ah! your accident: how was that?" bending over Madeline.

"Why, you see," explained Davlin, "she picked up the pistol, and, not being acquainted with the use of fire-arms, desired to investigate under my instructions. Having loaded it, explaining the process by illustration, she, being timid, begged me to put it up. Laughing at her fear, I was about to obey, when, moving around carelessly, my hand came in contact with that chair, setting the thing off. The sight of my bleeding arm frightened her so that I saw she was about to faint. As I caught he I myself lost consciousness, and we fell together. But how will she come out, doctor? tell me that; poor little girl!"

"She will come out of this trance-swoon to die almost immediately, or to pass through a fever stage that may result fatally later Her bodily condition is one of unusual prostration from fatigue; and evidently, she has been sustaining some undue excitement for a considerable time."

"Been travelling, and pretty well tired with the journey. That, I suppose, taken with this pistol affair—but tell me, doctor, what she will need, so that I may attend o it immediately."

"If she is living at noon," said Dr. Vaughan, reflectively, "it will be out of the question to remove her from here, without risking her life, for weeks to come. If she comes out of this, and you will leave her in my hands, I will, with the aid of this good woman," nodding towards the nurse, "undertake to pull her through. It will be necessary that she have perfect quiet, and sees no face that may in any manner excite her, during her illness and convalescence."

Davlin mused for a few moments before making answer. He did not care to excite remark by calling in unnecessary attendants. Dr. Vaughan he knew by reputation as as a skilful physician. As well trust him as another, he thought, and it was no part of his plan to let this girl die if skill could save her.

In answer to his natural inquiry as to how the doctor was so speedily on the spot when needed, Henry had truthfully replied that he knew the medical man by sight, and that, fortunately, he was passing when he ran down to the street for assistance. Davlin was further convinced that he, Henry, knew nothing save that the young lady rang for him to show her out, and he according to orders, had obeyed.

"Well, sir," Davlin said, at last, "I shall leave the lady and the premises entirely in your hands as soon as the crisis has passed. hen, as my presence might not prove beneficial, while I carry this arm in a sling, at least, I will run down into the country for a few days. My man, here, is entirely at your disposal. Don't spare any pains to pull her through safely, doctor. I will look in again at noon."

He rose and went softly out of the room, the doctor having answered him only by a nod of assent."

"Zounds! how weak I feel," he ejaculated. "I hope the girl won't die. Anyhow, I have no notion of figuring at a death-bed scene. So I'll just keep myself out of the way till the thing is decided. Then, I'll run down and let Cora coddle me up a bit. I can explain my wounded arm as the result of a little affair at the card-table."

Noon came, and slowly, slowly, stern Death relaxed his grasp upon the miserable girl, for Death, like man, finds no satisfaction in claiming willing victims Slowly the life fluttered back to her heart; and because Death had yielded her up and to retain it would be to lose her life reason forsook her.

Under the watchful care of the skilled nurse, and the ministrations of the young

physician, she now lay tossing in the delirium of fever.

Nothing worse to fear, for days at least, reported the doctor. So the afternoon train bore Lucian Davlin away from the city and his victim, to seek repose and diversion in the society of his comrade, Cora.

"She will come out of this now, I think," he muttered. "Then—Oh, I'll tame your proud spirit yet, my lady. I would not give you up now for half a million."

And he meant it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREADS OF THE FABRIC.

WHAT had become of Madeline Payne?

The question went the round of the village, as such questions do. The servants of Oakley fed upon it. They held secret conferences in the kitchen, and grew loud and argumentative when they knew John Arthur was safely out of hearing. They bore themselves with an an air of subdued, unobservant melancholy in his presence, and waxed important, mysterious and unsatisfactory, when in converse with the townsfolk—as was quite right and proper, for were they not, in the eyes of mystery hunters, objects of curiosity secondary only to their master himself?

The sombre-faced old housekeeper gave utterance to a doleful croak or two, and a more doleful prophecy. But after a summons from John Arthur, and a brief interview with him in the closely shut sacredness of his especial den, not even the social intercourse of the kitchen and the inspiration that the prolonged absence of the master always lent to things below stairs, could beguile from her anything beyond the terse statement that 'she didn't meddle with her master's affairs," and she "s'posed Miss Madeline knew where she was."

The housemaid, who read novels and was rather fond of Miss Payne, grieved for a very little while, but found in this "visitation of providence," as John Arthur piously termed it, food for romance weaving on her own responsibility. She entertained Peter, the groom, coachman and general factotum, with divers suggestions and suppositions, each more soul harrowing than the last, making of poor Madeline a lay figure upon which she fitted all the catastrophes that had ever befallen her yellow-covered "heroinesses."

The villagers talked. It was all they could do, and their tongues were very busy for a time until, in fact, a fresher sensation arrived. Nurse Hagar was viewed and interviewed; but beyond sincere expression of grief at her disappearance, and the unvarying statement that she had not even the slightest conjecture as to the fate of the lost girl, nothing could be gained from her.

Hagar was somewhat given to rather bluntly spoken opinions of folk who happened to run counter to her notions in regard to prying, or, in fact, her notions on any subject. In the present emergency she became a veritable social hedgehog, and was soon left to solitude and her own devices.

Whatever were Hagar's opinions on the subject, she kept them discreetly locked within her own breast. She had received, at their last interview, a revelation of the depth and force of character which lay dormant in the nature of Madeline; and she believed, even when she grieved most, that the girl would return, and that when she came she would make her advent felt.

John Arthur went to the city "to put the matter in the hands of the detectives," he said. But as he most fervently hoped and wished that he had seen the last of his "stumbling-block," and believed that of her own will she would not return, it is hardly to be supposed that the Secret Service was severely taxed.

Be this as it may, the Summer days passed and he heard nothing of Madeline.

Meantime, the neat little hotel that rejoiced in the name of the Bellair House,

displayed on a fresh page of its register the signature of Lucian Davlin once more, and underneath it that of Mrs. C. Torrance.

Mrs. C. Torrance was a blonde young widow, dressed in weeds of most elegant quality and latest style, with just the faintest hint of an approaching season of half mourning.

Mrs. Torrance had now been an inmate of Bellair House some days, and she certainly had no reason to complain that her present outlook was not all that could be desired. Already she had met the object of her little masquerade, and it was charming to see the alacrity with which John Arthur placed himself in the snare set for him by these plotters, and how gracefully he submitted as the cords tightened around him.

Over and over again Davlin thanked his lucky star for having so ordered his goings that, on his previous visit, he had never been brought into immediate contact with John Arthur. Over and again he congratulated himself that his meetings with Madeline had been kept their own secret, for he knew nothing of the watchful, jealous eyes of old Hagar.

On a fine summer morning, or rather "forenoon"—for Mrs. Torrance was a luxurious widow, and her "brother," Mr. Davlin, not at all enamoured of early rising—on a fine forenoon, then, the pair sat in the little hotel parlour, partaking of breakfast. They relished it, too, if one might judge from the occasional pretty little ejaculations, expressive of enjoyment and appreciation, that fell from the lips of the widow.

"More cream, monsieur? Oh but this fruit is delicious! And I believe there is a grand difference in the qualities of city and country cream."

"The difference in the favour of the country living, eh? I say, Co., don't you think your appetite is rather better than is exactly expected, or in order, for a widow in the second stage of her grief?"

Things were moving just now as Mr. Davlin approved, and he felt inclined to be jocular.

Cora laughed merrily. Then holding up a pretty, berry-stained hand, she said, with mock solemnity, "That is the last, my greatly shocked brother. But didn't you inform Mr. Arthur that we should accept of his kind offer to survey the woods and grounds of Oakley in his company, and isn't this the day, and almost the hour?"

"So it is; I had forgotten."

It was not long before the pair were equipped, and sauntering slowly in the direction of the Oakley estate.

Their morning's enterprise was more than rewarded, and the cause of the widow was in a fair way to victory, when, after having politely refused to lunch with Mr. Arthur on that day, and gracefully promised to dine at Oakley on the next day but one, they bade adieu to that flattered and fascinated gentleman, and left him at the entrance of his grounds.

Then they sauntered slowly back, keeping to the wooded path. Arriving at the fallen tree, the scene of so many interviews between Madeline and Lucian, Cora seated herself on the mossy trunk and announced her determination to rest.

Accordingly her escort threw himself upon the soft grass, and betook himself to his inevitable cigar, while he closed his eyes and allowed the vision of Madeline to occupy the place now usurped by Cora. Very absorbing the vision must have been, for he gave an almost nervous start as Cora's voice broke the stillness:

"Lucian, did you ever see this runaway daughter of Mr. Arthur's?"

Lucian started unmistakably now. Then he employed himself in pulling up tufts of the soft grass, pretending not to have heard.

"Lucian!" impatiently.

"Eh, Co., what is it?" affecting a yawn.

"I ask, did you ever see this Madeline Payne, who ran away recently?"

"I? Oh, no. Old fellow always kept her shut up too close, I fancy. They say

she was pretty, and you are the first pretty woman I have seen in these parts, Co.?"

"Well, then, I'm sorry you didn't," quoth Cora, "for from motives of delicacy I really don't care to inquire of others, and I have just curiosity enough to wish to know how she looked."

"Sorry I can't enlighten you, Co. Get it all out of the old fellow after the joyful event."

"Umph! Well, *that* business prospers, *mon brave*. We shall win, I think, as usual."

"Yes, and never easier, Co."

"Well, I don't anticipate much trouble in landing our fish. But come along, Lucian, this romantic dell might make you forget luncheon; it can't have that effect on me."

Cora gathered her draperies about her, and prepared to quit the little grove, her companion following half reluctantly.

CHAPTER IX.

GONE!

HOURS that seemed days; days that seemed years; weeks that seemed centuries; yet they all passed, and Madeline Payne scarce knew, when they were actually gone, that they were not all a dream.

Life, after that first yielding of heart and brain, had been a delirium; then a conscious torture of mind and body; next a burden almost too great to bear; and then a dreamy lethargy. Heaven be praised for such moods; they are saviours of life and reason in crises such as this through which the stricken girl was passing.

Madness had wrought upon her, and her ravings had revealed some otherwise dark places and blanks in her story to her guardian and nurses. Pain had tortured her, Death wrestled with her, and then, because he could inspire her with no fear of him, because she mocked at his terrors and wooed him, fled away,

In his place came Life, to whom she gave no welcoming smile. But Life stayed, for Life is as regardless of our wishes as is Death.

Forms had hovered about her; kindly voices, sweet voices, had murmured at her bedside. At times, an angel had held the cooling draught to her thirsty lips. At last these dream-creatures resolved themselves into realities.

Doctor Vaughan, who had ministered to her with the solicitude of a brother, the gentleness of a woman, and the goodness of an angel.

Olive Girard who, leaving all other cares, was ever at her bedside, and who came to that place at a sacrifice of feeling, after a wrestling with pride, bringing a bitterness of memory, and a patient courage of heart, that the girl could not then realise.

Henry, too, black of skin, warm of heart; who waited in the outer court, and seemed to allow himself full and free respiration only when the girl was pronounced out of danger.

Out of danger! What a misapplication of words!

From the scene of conflict, at the last flutter of Death's gloomy mantle, comes the man of medicine; watch in hand, boots a tiptoe, face grave but triumphant. His voice bids a subdued farewell to the somberness proper to a probable death-bed, coming up just a note higher in the scale of solemnities, as it announces to the eager trembling, waiting ones:

"*The danger is past!*"

Death, the calm, the restful, the never weary; Death, the friend of long suffering, and world weariness and despair; Death, the rescuer, the sometime comforter, has gone away with empty arms and reluctant tread, and Life, flushed, triumphant, seizes his rescued subject and flings her out into the sea of human lives, perhance to alight upon some tiny green islet or, likelier yet, to buffet about among black waters, or encounter winds and storms, upheld only by a half-wrecked raft or floated by a scarce-supporting spar.

And she is out of danger!

Hedged around about by sorrow, assailed by temptation, over-shadowed by sin. And, "the danger is over!"

Buffeted by the waves of adversity; longing for things out of reach; running after *ignis fatui* with eager out-stretched hands, and careless, hurrying feet, among pitfalls and snares. And, out of danger!

Open your eyes, Madeline Payne; lift up your voice in thanksgiving; you have come back to the world. Back where the sun shines and the dew falls: where the flowers are shedding their perfume, and song birds are making glad music; where men make merry and women smile; where gold shapes itself into palaces and fame wreathes crowns for fair and noble brows; where beauty crowns valour, and valour kisses the lips of beauty. And where the rivers sparkle in the sunlight, and, sometimes, yield up from their embrace cold, dripping, dead things, that yet bear the semblance of your kind—all that is left of beings that were once like you!

Out of danger!

Where want and poverty, and—God help us!—vice, hide their heads in dim alleys and under smoky garret roofs. Where beaten mothers and starving children dare hardly aspire to the pure air and sunlight, the whole world for them being enshrined in a crust of bread. Where thieves mount upwards on ladders beaten from pilfered gold, and command cities and sway nations. Where wantonness laughs and thrives in gilded cages, and starves and dies in mouldy cellars.

Out of danger!

Madeline, the place that was almost yours, in the land of the unknowable, is given to another. The waters of death have cast you back upon the shores of the living. You are "out of danger!"

What was to become of Madeline, now that they had brought her back to life? This was a question which occurred to the two who so kindly interested themselves in the fate of the unknown and headstrong girl.

While they planned a little, as was only natural, yet they knew from what they had seen of their charge that, decide for her how they would, only so far as that decision corresponded with her own inclinations would she abide by it. So they left Madeline's future for Madeline to decide, and found occupation for their kindliness in ministering to her needs of the present.

Once during her illness, and just as the light of reason had returned to the lovely hazel eyes, Lucian Davlin came. But he found the door of the sick chamber closely shut and closely guarded. The slightest shock to her nerves would be fatal now—they told him. And he, having done the proper thing, as he termed it, and not being in any way fond of the sight of pain and pallor, yielded with a graceful simulation of reluctance. Having been assured that with careful nursing, there was nothing to fear, he deposited a check on his bankers in the hands of her attendants, and went away contentedly, smiling under his moustache at the novelty of being turned away from his own door.

He went back to Bellair, to Cora, and to the web they were weaving, little dreaming whose hands would take up the thread and continue and complete what they had thus begun.

And now the day has come for Madeline to leave the shelter that she hates. Pale and weak, she sits in the great easy chair that had served as a barrier between herself and her enemy, and converses with Olive Girard while they await the arrival of Clarence Vaughan, who is to take them from the place so distasteful to all three.

It has been settled that, for the present, Madeline will be the guest of Olive. What will come after health and strength are fully restored, they have not discussed much. Olive Girard and Doctor Vaughan had agreed that all thoughts of the future must bring a grief and care with them, and the mind of the invalid was in no condition for painful thought and study. So Olive has been careful to avoid all topics that might bring her troubles too vividly to mind.

But partly to divert Madeline's mind from her own woes, partly to enable the unfortunate girl to feel less a stranger among them, she has talked to her of Doctor Vaughan, of her sister, and at last of herself.

And Madeline has listened to her description of merry, lovely Claire Keith, and wondered what she could have in common with this buoyant, care-free girl, who was evidently her sister's idol. Yet she found herself thinking often of Olive's beautiful sister. Once, in the brief absence of Olive, she had said to Doctor Vaughan:

"Mrs. Girard has told me of her sister; is she very lovely? And do you know her well?"

"She is very fair, and sweet, and good. You will love her when you know her, and I think you will be friends."

She has not needed this; the tell-tale eye was sufficient to reveal the fact that it was not, as she had at first supposed, Olive Girard, but the younger sister, whom Clarence Vaughan loved.

"I might have known," she murmured to herself. "Olive Girard has the face of one whose love dream has passed away and lost itself in sorrow; and he looks, full of strength and hope, straight into the future."

As they sat together waiting, there was still that same contrast, which you felt rather than saw, between these two. They might have posed as the models of Resignation and Unrest.

The look of patient waiting was five years old upon the face of Olive Girard. Five years ago she had been so happy—a bride, beautiful and beloved. Beautiful she was still—with the beauty of shadow; beloved, too, but how sadly! Philip Girard had been convicted of a great crime, and for five long years had worn a felon's garb, and borne the anguish of one set apart from all the world.

The hand that had darkened the life of Olive Girard, and the hand that had turned the young days of the girl Madeline into a burden, was one and the same.

Afterwards Madeline listened to the pathetic history of Olive's sorrow.

Sitting in that great lounging chair Madeline looked very fair, very childlike. Sadly sweet were her large, deep eyes, and her hair, shorn while the fever raged, clustered in soft tiny rings about her slender, snowy neck and blue-veined temples. She had not been permitted to talk much during her convalescence, and Olive had as yet gleaned only a general outline of her story.

"Mrs. Girard," said the girl, resting her pale cheek in the palm of a thin, tiny hand, "you once said something to me about—about some one who had been wronged by—" Something sadder than tears choked her utterance.

As Olive turned her grave, clear eyes away from the window, and fixed them in expectation upon her, Madeline's own eyes fell. She sat before her benefactress with downcast lids, and the hatefull name unuttered.

"I know," said Olive, after a brief silence; "I referred to a girl now lying in a hospital. She is very young, and has been cruelly wronged by him. She is poor, as you may judge, and earned her living in the ballet at the theatre. She was thrown from a carriage which had been furnished her by *him*, to carry her home from some rendezvous—of course the driver took care of himself and his horses. The poor girl was picked up and carried to the hospital. She was without friends and almost penniless. She sent to him—for him; he returned no answer. She begged for help for enough to enable her to obtain what was needed in her illness. Message after message was sent, and finally a reply came, brought by a messenger who had been bidden to insist upon receiving an answer. The servant said that his master had directed him to say to any messenger who called, that he was out of town."

"The wretch! He deserves death!"

Madeline's eyes blazed, and she lifted her head with some of her olden energy.

"Softly, my dea ; 'Thou shalt do no murder.'"

"It is not murder to kill a human tiger!"

Olive made no answer.

"Is she still very ill, this girl?" questioned Madeline.

"She cannot recover."

"Shall I see her?"

"If you wish to; do you?"

"Yes."

Another long pause; then Madeline glanced up at her friend, and said listlessly: "What do you intend to do with me?"

"Do with you?" smiling at her. "Make you well again, and then try and coax you to be my other sister. Don't you think I need one?"

No answer.

"Life has much in store for you yet, Madeline."

"Yes," bitterly again.

"You are so young."

"And so old."

"Madeline, you are too young for sombre thoughts and repining.

"I shall not repine."

"Good! You will try to forget?"

"Impossible!"

"No; not impossible.'

"I do not wish to, then."

"And why?"

"Wait and see."

"Madeline, you will do nothing rash? You will trust me and confide in me?"

The girl raised her eyes slowly in surprise. "I have not so many friends that I can afford to lose one."

"Thank you, dear; then we will let the subject drop until we are stronger. And here is the carriage and Doctor Vaughan."

Out into the sunny Summer morning went Madeline, and soon she was established in a lovely little room which, Olive said, was hers so long as she could be persuaded to occupy it. Here the girl rested and, ministered unto by gentle hands, she felt life coming back.

And Lucian?

Late in the afternoon of the day that saw Madeline depart from his elegant rooms, Mr. Davlin arrived, and found no one to deny him admittance. All the doors stood ajar, and Henry was flitting about with an air of putting things to rights. The bird had flown.

He gained from Henry the following: "I don't know sir, where she went. A gentleman came with a carriage, and the young lady and the nurse went away with him."

Lucian was not aware what manner of nurse Madeline had had in her illness. And Henry having purposely misled him, enjoyed his discomfiture.

"She told me to give you this, sir," said he, handing his master a little package.

Tearing off the wrapper, Lucian held in his hand the little pistol that had inflicted upon him the wounded arm. From its mouth he drew a scrap of paper, and this is what it said:

When next we meet, I shall have other weapons!

CHAPTER X.

BONNIE, BEWITCHING CLAIRE.

Four months. We find Madeline standing in the late Autumn sunset, "clothed and in her right mind," strong with the strength of youth, and beautiful with even more than her olden beauty.

Fair is the prospect as seen from the grounds of Mrs. Girard's suburban villa, and so, perhaps, Claire Keith is thinking.

She is looking down the level road, and at the trees on either hand, decked in all their October magnificence of scarlet and brown and gold, half concealing coquettish villas, and more stately residences.

The eyes of Madeline were turned away from the vista of villas and trees, and were gazing toward the business thoroughfare leading into the bustle of the town, gazing after the receding figure of Doctor Clarence Vaughan as he cantered away from the

villa; gazing until a turn of the road hid him from her view. Then, and what did she mean by it? she turned her face toward Claire with a questioning look in her eyes, the question came almost to her lips. But the words were repressed.

Bonnie Clair was thinking of anything but Clarence Vaughan just then. Presently she turned a bright glance upon her companion, who was gathering clusters of the fallen maple leaves, with face half averted.

"A kiss for your thoughts, beautiful blonde Madeline. I certainly think it is ten minutes since Doctor Vaughan departed and silence fell upon us."

She bent down, and taking her companion's head between two dimpled hands, pulled it back, until she could look into the solemn brown eyes.

"Come, now," coaxingly, "what were you thinking?"

Madeline extricated herself from Claire's playful grasp, and replied with a half laugh: "It must be mutual confession then, you small highwaymen, how do you like my terms?"

"Only so so," flushing and laughing. "I was meditating the propriety of telling you some thing some day and was thinking of that something just now, but——"

"But," mimicked Madeline, with half-hearted playfulness; "what will you give me to relieve your embarrassment, and guess?"

"You can't," emphatically.

"Can't I? We will see. My dear, I fear you have left a little corner of your heart behind you in far-away Baltimore. You didn't come to pay your annual visit to your sister, quite heart free."

Anyone wishing to gain an insight into the character of Claire Keith might have taken a long step in that direction could he have witnessed her reception of this unexpected shot. She opened her dark eyes in comic amazement, and dropping into a garden chair, exclaimed with a look of frank inquiry:

"Now, however could you guess that?"

Because," said Madeline, in a constrained voice, and with all the laughter fading from her eyes; "Because I know the symptoms."

"I see," dropping her voice suddenly. "Oh, Madeline, how I wish you could forget *that*."

"Why should I forget my love dream," scornfully, "any more than you yours?"

"Oh, Madeline, but you said you had ceased to care for him that you should never mourn his loss."

"*Mourn his loss!*" turning upon Claire, fiercely. "Do you think it is for him I mourn my *dead*; my lost happiness, my shattered dreams, my life made a bitter, burdensome thing. Mourn him? I have for Lucian Davlin but one feeling—hate!"

Madeline, as she uttered these last words, had turned upon Claire a face whose fierce intensity of expression was startling. For a moment the two gazed into each other's eyes—the one with curling lip and sombre, menacing g'ance, the other with a startled face as if she read something new and to be feared, in the eye of her friend.

Claire had been an inmate of her sister's house for four weeks. When first she arrived, she had heard Madeline's story, at Madeline's request, from the lips of her sister Olive, and now the girls were fast friends. Generous Claire had found much to wonder at, to pity and to love, in the story and the character of the unfortunate girl. Possessing a frank, sunshiny nature, and never having known an actual grief, she could lavish sweet sympathy to one afflicted. But she could not conceive what it would be like to live on when faith had perished aud hope was a mockery. She had never known, therefore, never missed, a father's love and care. Indeed, he who filled the place of father and guardian, her mother's second husband, was all that a real parent could be. Claire seldom remembered that Mr. James Keith was not her father, and very few except the family of Keith, knew that "Miss Claire Keith,

daughter of the rich James Keith of Baltimore," was in truth only a step-daughter.

Mrs. Keith, whose first husband was Richard Keith, cashier in his wealthy cousin's banking house, had buried that husband when Olive was five years old, and baby Claire scarce able to lisp his name. In a little less than two years she had married James Keith, the banker-cousin, and shortly after the marriage, James Keith had transferred his business interests to Baltimore, and there remained.

So Claire's baby brothers had never been told that she was not their "very own" sister, for of Olive they knew little, her marriage having separated them at first, and subsequently her obdurate acceptance of the consequences of that marriage.

When the law pronounced her husband a criminal, Mr. Keith had commanded Olive to abandon both husband and home, and return to his protection. This, true-hearted Olive refused to do. Her step-father, enraged at her obstinacy in clinging to a man who had been forsaken by all the world beside, bade her choose between them. Either she must let the law finish its work of breaking Philip Girard's heart by setting her free, or she must accept the consequences of remaining the wife of a criminal.

Olive chose the latter, and thenceforth remained in her own lonely home, never even once visiting the place of her childhood.

"He called my husband a criminal," she said, "and I will never cross his threshold until he has had cause to withdraw those words."

Claire, however, announced her intention of visiting her sister whenever she chose, and she succeeded, in part, in carrying out her will, for every year she passed two months more with Olive.

What picture the two girls now made, standing face to face.

Madeline, with her lithe grace of form, her pure pale complexion lit up by those fathomless brown eyes, and rendering more noticeable and beautiful the tiny rosy mouth, with its satellite dimples; with such wee white, blue veined hands, and such a clear ringing, yet marvelously sweet voice. Madeline was very beautiful, and Claire, as she looked at her, wondered how any man could bear to lose such loveliness, or have the heart to betray it; as if ever pure woman could fathom the depth of a bad man's wickedness.

Bonnie, bewitching Claire! Never was contrast more perfect. A scarf, like scarlet flame, flung about her shoulders, set off the richness of her clear brunette skin, through which the crimson blood flamed in cheek and lip. Eyes, now black, now grey, changing, flashing, witching eyes: grey in quiet moments, darkening with mirth or sadness, anger or pain; hair black and silky, rippling to the rounded, supple waist in glossy waves. Not so tall as Madeline, and rounded and dimpled as a Hebe.

Bringing her will into service, Madeline banished the gloom from her face and said, with an attempt at gaiety:

"I must be a terrible wet blanket when my ghost rises, Claire. But come, you have excited my curiosity; let us sit down while you tell me more of this mighty man who has pitched his tent in the wilderness of your heart, to the exclusion of others who might aspire."

They seated themselves upon a rustic bench and Claire replied:

"Don't anticipate too much, inquisitor; I have no acknowledged lover, but ——" blushing charmingly, "I have every reason to think that I am loved fondly and sincerely. He is very handsome, Madeline, and—but wait, I will show you his picture."

Madeline nodded, and Claire bounded away, to return quickly bearing in her hand a finely wrought cabinet photograph, encased in velvet and gilt, *à la souvenir*. Placing it in her companion's hand, she sat down with a little triumphant sigh, and gazed over Madeline's shoulder with a proud, glad look in her eyes.

"Blonde?" suggested Madeline.

"Yes," eagerly; "such lovely hair and

whiskers, perfect gold colour; and fair as a woman."

"So I should judge," and she continued to gaze.

Blonde he was, certainly; hair thrown carelessly back from a brow broad and white; eyes, light, but with an expression that puzzled the gazer.

"Eyes, what colour?" she said, without taking her own off the picture.

"Blue; pale blue, but capable of *such* varying expression."

"Just so," dryly; "they look mild and saintly here, but I think those eyes are capable of another expression. I could fancy the brain behind such eyes to be ——"

"What?" eagerly.

"Cruel, crafty, treacherous."

"Oh, Madeline!"

"There, there: I didn't say that he," —tapping the picture—"possessed these qualities. His eyes are unusual ones; did you ever see his mouth."

"What a question—through all those whiskers? no; but he has beautiful teeth."

"So have tigers. There, dear, take the picture; I am no fit judge, perhaps. Remember, I once knew a man with the face of an angel, and the heart of a fiend. Your friend is certainly handsome; let us hope he is equally good."

"He is; I know it," asserted Claire.

Then she told her companion how she had met him at the house of a friend; how he was very learned and scientific; very grave and dignified; and very devoted to herself. And how, beyond these few facts, she knew little if anything of her blonde hero, Edward Percy.

Madeline received this information in a grave silence, whose chill affected Claire as well, and after a few moments, as if by mutual consent, they arose and entered the house.

Olive Girard had been absent a week; gone on a journey, sacred to her as any Meccan pilgrimage, a visit to the place of her husband's imprisonment. Every year she made this journey, returning home in some measure comforted; for she had seen her beloved.

She came back on this evening, as the two girls were mingling their voices in gay bravura duets—by mutual consent they avoided all songs of a pathetic order, for reasons which neither would have cared to acknowledge.

The evening having passed away, Claire found herself in her chamber gazing at her lover's pictured face and thinking how good, how noble it was, and what a little goose she had been to allow anything Madeline had said to apply to him. A sudden thought occurred to her, and going to Madeline's door, she tapped gently. The door opened, and Claire, raising a warning finger, said:

"Madeline, I forgot to tell you that Olive knows nothing of Edward Percy, and—I don't want to tell her just yet. You will not mention it?"

"No."

"Then good-night, and pleasant dreams."

"Thank you," in a grave voice; "good-night."

Claire returned to her room and penned a long letter to Edward Percy, full of sweet confidence, gaiety and trustfulness. She reperused his last letter, said her prayers, or rather read them, for Clair was a staunch little church-woman, and then slept and dreamed bright dreams.

CHAPTER XI.

A GLEAM OF LIGHT.

A few moments after Claire's door had closed for the last time, Madeline came cautiously from her room, her slippered feet making no sound on the softly carpeted floor. Passing Claire's door, she paused before another, opened it gently, and stood in Olive Girard's bed-chamber.

Evidently she was expected, for a light was burning softly and Olive sat near it with a book in her hand, in an attitude of waiting.

Madeline seated herself at the little

table as if quite accustomed to such interviews, and said in a low tone:

"I am so glad you came to-night; are you too tired for a long talk?"

"No. Tell me all that has happened since I have been absent."

"Olive, I must go away; back to Bellair," said Madeline, abruptly.

"Madeline, you are mad! To Bellair? Why *he* is there often now."

"He will not find me out, never fear. I *must* go to Bellair within the week."

Olive leaned forward and scanned the girl's face closely and long. At last, she said: "Madeline, what is it you meditate? tell me."

"Going back to Bellair; keeping an eye upon the proceedings of Mr. Arthur; finding out what game that man and woman are playing there; and baffling and punishing them all."

She had been kept informed, through Henry, into whose hands had fallen a letter in Cora's handwriting, bearing the Bellair postmark, and addressed to Lucian Davlin, who, so Henry said, "went down, on and off," and always appeared satisfied with the result of his journey.

Olive argued long against this resolution, but found it impossible to dissuade Madeline.

"It is useless," the girl said, firmly. "I should have died but for the expectation of a time when I could be avenged, and this time I must bring it about. All through my convalescence I have pondered how I could best avenge my mother's wrongs, and my own. Now Providence has thrown together the two men who are my enemies; why, I do not yet know, but perhaps it is that I may make the one a weapon against the other. And now I want to ask you some questions."

"Ask, then."

"I shall touch upon a painful subject, and I will tell you why. After you went away, the story of your sorrow remained with me. So I thought the ground all over, and formed some conclusions. Do you wish to hear them?"

Olive nodded, wearily.

"You have told me," said Madeline, assuming a calm, business-like tone, "that Lucian Davlin testified against your husband at his trial. Now the wounded man, Percy, stated that he recognised the man who struck him?"

"Yes."

"Well, what was Davlin's testimony?"

"That he saw may husband stealing in the direction of the place where the wounded man was found, but a few moments before he was struck, wearing the same hat and hunting jacket that the injured man testified was worn by his would-be assassin."

"Oh!" Madeline knitted her brows in thought a moment; then—"Was the coat and hat Mr. Girard's?"

"Yes; he had thrown them off in the afternoon, while the heat was intense, and had fallen asleep. When he awoke, he heard them calling him to supper. It was late in the evening when he remembered his coat and hat, and went back to look for them. He went just at the time when the man must have been struck, and his absence told against him in the evidence."

"Did he find his garments?"

"No; they were found by others, not where he had left them, but nearer the scene of the crime."

"Ah! And who was the first to discover the injured man?"

"Why, I believe it was Mr. Davlin." Olive looked more and more surprised at each question, "Why do you ask these things, Madeline?"

The girl made a gesture of impatience. "Wait," she said, "I will explain in good time." Again she considered. "Was there any ill-feeling between your husband and Davlin?"

"There was no open misunderstanding, but I know there was mutual dislike. Philip saw that Davlin was making systematic efforts to win money from the party, and had, therefore, persuaded one or two of his friends to give gaming little counte-

nance. No doubt he kept money out of the man's pocket."

"And what was the standing of that man and the victim, this Percy?"

"They were much together, and Philip tells me he had sometimes fancied that Davlin held some power over Percy. Davlin had won largely from him, and the man seemed much annoyed, but paid over the money without demur."

"And now, how did your husband stand toward the injured man?"

"That is the worst part of the story. They had had high words only that very day. Philip had been acquainted with Percy at school, and he knew so much that was not in his favour, that he was unable to conceal his real opinion of the man at all times. One day high words arose, and Philip uttered a threat which was misconstrued, after the attack upon Percy. They said he threatened his life. But Percy knew that only his honour was meant. Davlin knew this, too; must have known it, for he was aware that the two had met before they came together with the party."

"I cannot see why Lucian Davlin should be your husband's enemy."

"I can understand that he hated Philip for the same reason that a thief hates the light, and Philip had baulked his plans."

"True; and yet ——"

"And yet?" enquiringly,

"Bad as the man is, I can see but one motive that could induce even him to swear away the liberty, almost the life, of a man who never wronged him."

"Still, he did it," said Olive, with a weary sigh.

"True; and he did it for a motive."

"And that motive ——"

"Was the strongest instinct of the human race."

"What?" eagerly

"Self-preservation."

Olive started up with a half cry. "Madeline, in heaven's name, *what* do you mean!"

"That Lucian Davlin threw suspicion upon the innocent to screen the guilty," said the girl, in a low, firm tone."

"And the guilty one, then?"

"Himself. Do you think him too good for it?" sneeringly.

"Oh, no! oh, no! But this I had never thought of—yet it may be true."

She fell into deep thought; after a time she started up. "I must consult a detective immediately," she said.

"You must do no such thing," cried Madeline. springing to her feet; "why did not the detectives find this out before? Because they have not my reasons for hunting that man down. *I* found this clue if it be one. I claim it; it is my right and I will have it. If he is to be undone, it shall be by my hands. I swear it."

They faced each other in silence.

Slowly Olive recalled to her countenance and voice its usual sweet calm, and then seated herself and talked long and earnestly with Madeline.

The little bronze clock on the mantel was on the stroke of two when the conference ended, and Madeline retired to her own room, but not to sleep. She sat and thought until the dawn shone in at her window.

One link was missing from the chain; no motive had been discovered for an attack on Percy by Davlin.

"But I will find it," she muttered. Then, as a new thought occured to her, she caught her breath. "Claire's lover is named Percy; can it be the same? Why did not this occur to me sooner? Why did I not ask for his first name and a description of him? If this man and Edward Percy should be one and the same! Pshaw! the name is not an uncommon one, and it may be only a coincidence. But your face is a bad one, Edward Percy, and I shall know it when I see it again."

The sun was not high in the heavens ere Madeline was astir, for her nature was such that strong excitement rendered rest impossible. Moving impatiently about the grounds, she saw a familiar form approaching through the shrubbery, and hastened to meet it.

The black visage of Henry beamed with

tisfaction as he made a hurried obesiance d placed in her hand a letter, saying:

"Master was preparing for a two days' urney when this letter came. He threw into his desk and bade me lock it and ring him the key. His back was turned nd I took the letter before I locked the esk. It was a long one, and from *her;* I nought you might want to see it."

"Right, Henry," said the girl quietly, s she opened the letter. "You will wait or it?"

"Yes, miss; it must not be missing when ne comes."

"Certainly not."

She returned to the letter, and this is what she read:

OAKLEY, October 11.

LUCIAN, *Mon Brave:*

I am in a fine predicament—have made a startling discovery. Mr. A—— has been sick and the mischief is to pay; and his sickness has brought some ugly facts to light.

The old man is *not* the sole proprietor of the Oakley wealth. That girl who ran away so mysteriously, and has never been heard of, will inherit at his death. He can bequeath his widow nothing. Oh, to know where that girl is! If she is alive my work is useless, my time is wasted. I think the old chap must have driven her to desperation, for he raved in his delirium of her and her words at parting. They must have been "searchers."

Well, to add to the general interest, Miss Arthur, aged fifty or so, is here. She is a juvenile old maid, who has a fortune in her own right, and so must be cultivated. She dresses like a sixteen-year-old, and talks like a fool, principally about a certain admirer, a "blonde demi-god"—her words—named Percy.

Something must be done; things must be talked over. Come down and make love to Miss Arthur. *Her* money is not entailed.

Bring me some Periques and a box of Alexis gloves—you know the number. Yours in disgust,

CORA MME. ARTHUR.

Madeline dropped the letter and stood amazed. What did it mean? "Cora *Mme.* Arthur!"

Henry stooped for the letter, and the act recalled her to herself. She thanked him for the service he had done her; told him of her intended departure; gave him some last instructions, and dismissed him with a kind good-bye.

"It is time to act," she muttered. "Good Heavens! the audacity of that man and woman! She is married to my step-father, if that letter does not lie; has married him for money, and is baffled there. She hoped to become *his widow,* aha! The plot thickens, indeed! Goodness! what a household! That bad old man, the still viler woman, dangerous Lucian Davlin, and that funny, youthful, cross, 'conceited spinster,' Ellen Arthur, who has a lover, and is name is—heaven save us—Percy! That name *will* mix itself up with my fate web, and why? Percy beloved of Claire; Percy who brought Philip Girard to his doom; Percy the lover of a rich old maid, are ye one and the same? Percy! Percy! Percy! I must cultivate the Percys at any cost."

She turned and entered the house, her head bent, thinking, thinking, thinking.

CHAPTER XII.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

LESS than a week after the events last related, and a family group surrounds the lunch table in the newly furnished morning room of Oakley.

The fair and fascinating Mrs. Torrance had accomplished the purpose for which she came to Bellair.

Truly had she said, "There is no fool like an old fool;" for John Arthur had been an easy victim. He had lost no time with his wooing, and so, a little less than two months from the day the fair widow came to Bellair, saw her mistress of John Arthur's household.

A bridal tour was not to her taste, much to the delight of the bridegroom. So they set about refitting some of the fine old rooms of the mansion, Cora having de-

clared that they were too gloomy to be inhabitable.

As it was to her interest to keep up the deception of frank affection, she had been, during the two months of their honeymoon, a model wife. But the discovery that John Arthur could leave her nothing save his blessing, had now been made, and Cora, who was already weary of her gray-headed dupe, had been for a few days past less careful in her dissembling.

For this reason John Arthur now sat with a moody brow, and watched her smile upon her brother with a feeling of jealous wrath.

The bride had thrown off her badge of mourning, and was very glad to bloom out once more in azure and white and rose—hues which her soul loved.

Opposite sat Miss Arthur, her sallowness carefully enameled over, her head adorned with an astonishing array of false braids and curls and frizzes, jetty in hue to match her eyes, which, so Cora informed Lucian in private, were "awfully beady."

The lady was perusing a paper, which she suddenly threw down, and said languidly, while she stirred her chocolate carefully. "Should not this be the day on which my new maid arrives?"

Miss Arthur, from perusing many novels of the Sir Walter Scott school, had acquired a very stately manner of speech, and, so she flattered herself, a very effective one.

"I don't know why Miss Arthur can want a maid; her toilets are always perfection," remarked Mr. Davlin to the general assembly.

Whereupon, Miss Arthur blushed, giggled, and disclaimed; Mrs. Arthur disappeared behind a newspaper; and Mr. Arthur emerged from the fog of thought that had enveloped him, to say brusquely:

"Miss Arthur want a maid? what's all this? A French maid in a country house—faugh!"

Miss Arthur gazed across at her brother, and said, loftily, and somewhat unmeaningly:

"It is what I have chosen to do, John." Then to Mr. Davlin, sweetly: "It is so hard to dispense with a maid when you have been accustomed to one."

"I suppose so."

"And this one comes so well recommended, you know, by Mrs. Overman and Mrs. Grosvenor. You have heard of these ladies in society, no doubt, Mr. Davlin?"

"Oh, certainly," aloud, "not," aside.

"And the name of the maid?" pursued Lucian.

"Her name," referring to the letter, "Céline Leroque—French, I presume."

"No doubt," dryly.

"Stop him, Miss Arthur," interrupted Cora, prettily; "he will certainly ask if she is handsome, if you let him open his mouth again."

Miss Arthur glanced at him suspiciously. "Not having seen her, I could not inform him," she said, coldly.

"Don't believe my sister," said Davlin, quietly, as he passed his cup. "Cora, a little more chocolate, please. Miss Arthur, I met Mrs. Grosvenor at the seaside, two years ago. Her toilets were the marvel of the day; she protested that all credit was due to her maid, who was a whole 'magazine of French art.' I thought this might be the same."

"I most earnestly hope that it is, pronounced Miss Arthur.

"And I most earnestly hope it isn't," grumbled her brother, who to-day felt vicious for many reasons, and didn't much care what the occasion was, so long as it gave him an excuse for growling.

At this happy stage of affairs, the door was opened and the housemaid announced: "An old lady, who says I am to tell you that her name is Hagar, wants to see you, sir," addressing Mr. Arthur.

The master of the house started, and an angry flush settled upon his face. "Send her away. I won't see the old beldam. Send her away."

The girl bowed and was about to retire when she was pushed from the doorway with little ceremony, and Nurse Hagar

ntered. Before the occupants of the oom had recovered from their surprise, r found voice to address her, she had rossed the room, and paused before John rthur. Placing a small bundle upon the able near him, she said:

"Don't think you can order me from our door, John Arthur, when I choose to nter it. I shall never come to you with- ut good reason, and I presume you will hink me a welcome messenger when you now my errand."

"Confound you," said the man, angrily, yet with an uneasy look in his eyes; "if you must chatter to me, come into the library." He arose and made a step toward the door.

"There is no need," said Hagar, with dignity; "my errand may interest others here besides yourself. I bring a message from the dead."

John Arthur turned ashen pale and trembled violently. All eyes were turned upon the speaker, however, and his agitation was unnoticed save by Hagar.

"Last night," she continued, "a carriage stopped at my door and a woman came in, bringing that bundle in her hands."

She paused and seemed struggling with her feelings.

"She said," continued Hagar, "that she was requested to come by a dying girl, else she would have written the message given to her. She belonged to a charitable society, and visited the hospital every week. She brought flowers and fruit to one of the patients—a girl who died asking her to write down what is on this card," holding out a bit of white cardboard, "and not to tell the officers of the hospital her true name. She had entered under the name of Martha Gray, and wished to be buried as such. The lady promised: the girl gave her those articles, and the lady kept her word, and brought the message. There is the bundle," in a choking voice, "and here is the card. That is all. Good-bye, John Arthur; be happy, if you can. And may God's curse fall upon all who drove her to her doom!"

She gathered her shawl about her shoulders and, casting a meaning glance at Lucian Davlin, passed from the room and the house.

John Arthur sat with eyes riveted upon the card before him. After a time he turned, and placing it in Davlin's hand, signed to him to read it, and hurriedly left the room.

The hand that had first stricken the young life, placed the evidence that the end had come, in the hand that had completed what the first began!

Something of this Lucian Davlin felt, hardened as he was, for he knew, without waiting for the proof, that the true name of the girl who died in the hospital was familiar to them all.

"Read!" ejaculated Cora, impatiently, "or give it to me."

"Lucian's eyes had scanned the card, and tossing it across to her, he pushed back his chair and walked to the window. Cora read for the benefit of her bewildered sister-in-law:

Madeline Payne, at St. Mary's Hospital. under name of Martha Gray, died—brain fever—no friends but nurse.

On the opposite side of the card was pencilled the full address of old Hagar, and this was all. Scant information, but it was enough.

Cora pounced upon the bundle and opened it. It contained a little purse; a few trinkets, which any of the servants could identify as belonging to Madeline; the cloak she had worn the evening of her flight; and a pocket-handkerchief with her name embroidered in the corner.

Satisfaction beamed in the face Cora turned toward Lucian, and away from Miss Arthur. She was mindful of the proprieties, however, and turning her eyes back upon the lady opposite, she pressed a dainty handkerchief to her countenance, and murmured plaintively:

"How very, very shocking and sad!

Poor Mr. Arthur is quite overcome, and no wonder—that poor, sweet, young girl."

Across Lucian's averted face flitted a smile of sarcasm. How little she knew of the truth, this fair hypocrite, and how unlikely she was ever to know now. If Madeline were dead, of what avail was any effort to break from the olden thraldom—for this is what had been in the mind of the scheming man.

Cora brushed her handkerchief across her eyes and arose languidly. "I must go to Mr. Arthur, poor man," she murmured, shaking out her flounces. "He is terribly shocked, I fear."

Studiously avoiding the necessity of glancing in the direction of Mr. Davlin, she glided from the room.

And so the news fell in Madeline's home, and its inmates were affected no more than this:

With Cora a renewal of tenderness toward "Dear John," and an increased stateliness toward Miss Arthur and the servants. More deference on Miss Arthur's part towards her brother, and less on his part toward her, as the possibility of being obliged to ask a small loan faded away into the past of empty purses and closed up coffers.

Lucian took upon himself the responsibility of visiting the city and calling at St. Mary's, there to be reassured of the fact that one Martha Gray had died within its walls and been buried.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS ARTHUR'S FRENCH MAID.

After this the days flew by very much alike.

Miss Arthur's maid arrived, and proved indeed a treasure, nor was she as obnoxious to Mr. John Arthur as he had evidently intended to find her. Perhaps Céline Leroque knew by instinct that the master of Oakley cherished an aversion to French maids in particular; or perhaps he was an exceptional French maid, and craved neither the smiles nor slyly administered caresses, that fell to the lot of pretty *femmes de chambre*, at least in novels. At any rate, certain it is that Miss Arthur's maid manifested no desire to be seen by the inmates of the household, and she had been domiciled for some weeks without having vouchsafed to either John Arthur or Lucian Davlin more than a fleeting glimpse of her maidship.

Things were becoming very monotonous to some of the occupants of the Oakley manor; very, very dull and flavourless.

Cora was growing restless. Not that the astute lady permitted signs of discontent to become manifest to the uninitiated, but Lucian Davlin saw, with a mingled feeling of satisfaction and dismay, that the *rôle* of devoted wife had ceased to interest his blonde comrade in iniquity.

The fact gave him a malicious pleasure, because, as fate had dared to play against him, he would have felt especially aggrieved if a few thorns had not been introduced into the eiderdown that seemingly enveloped his fair accomplice.

But he felt some dismay, for he knew by the swift flash of azure eyes under golden lashes, by the sway of her shoulders as she paced the terrace, by the nervous tapping of her slippered foot at certain times in the intervals of table chat—that Cora was *thinking*. And when Cora thought, something was about to happen.

It was in obedience to one of those swift side glances, that he followed her from the morning-room, one forenoon about three weeks after the news of Madeline's death had come to them. The day was bright but chill, and the woman had wrapped herself in a shawl of vivid crimson, but stood with bared head in the sunlight waiting the approach of her counterfeit brother.

"Cover your head, you very thoughtless woman," was his brotherly salutation as he approached, plunging about in his pockets in search of a cigar the while.

"Bother!" she ejaculated, tossing her golden locks; "my hair needs a sunbath.

only wish I dare indulge myself further! you had any heart you wouldn't torture e so constantly with the odour of those agnificent Havanas, when you know how y very soul longs for a weed!"

"Poor little woman," laughing maliciusly; "fancy Mrs. John Arthur of Oakley moking a *Perique!* Isn't it prime, Co.?" uffing out a cloud of perfumed smoke.

"Prime! bah! I'd like to strangle you, r——"

"Or?——" inquiringly.

"Somebody," laughing nervously.

"Just so; Miss Arthur would be a good ubject, and that would confer a favour on ne, too, by Jove!"

"I don't want to confer a favour on you You had much better try and do me one, I think."

"With all my heart, taking my ability for granted, of course; only tell me how."

Cora shrugged her crimson-clad shoulders, and they paced forward in silence for a time. Then as if his stillness had been speech of a distasteful kind, she ejaculated, crossly, and without turning her head: "Stuff! you talk too much!"

Lucian smiled maliciously, removed his cigar from between his lips, described a smoke wreath in mid-air, replaced his weed, and said: "Do I? then mum's the word;" and he relapsed into silence.

He seemed bent on annoying her, for there was a laughing glimmer in his eye, and he obstinately refused to attempt to draw her out, and so make easier whatever she might have to say, for he knew that she had signaled him out to-day for a purpose.

Mutely he walked by her side, and contentedly puffed at his cigar until, at length, she turned upon him, and struck petulantly at the hand that had just removed it from his lips. The weed fell from his fingers to the ground, and Cora ret her slippered heel upon it, as if it were an enemy, and laughed triumphantly.

"Now we are on a level," she cried. "Do you suppose I intend to give you that advantage over me?"

"It seems not," with a shrug expressive of resignation and a smile hidden by his moustache.

He was not the man to be angered, or even ruffled, by these little feminine onslaughts. In fact, they rather pleased and amused him, and he had become well accustomed to Cora's "little ways," as he called them. Deprived of his cigar, he thrust his hands into his pockets and whistled softly.

"Lucian, if you don't stop looking so comfortable and content, and altogether don't-care-ish I shall do something very desperate," she exclaimed, pettishly.

"No?" raising his eyebrows in mock incredulity; "you don't tell me. I thought you were in a little heaven of your own, Mrs. Arthur"

"Oh! you did? Very clever of you. Well, Mr. Davlin, has it occurred to you that heaven might not be a congenial climate for me?"

"Not while your wings are so fresh, surely? You have scarcely entered your paradise, fair peri."

"Haven't I?" ironically. "Well, I am tired of manna, anyhow." Cora was not always strictly elegant in her choice o expressions. "Now, Lucian, stop parleying, and tell me, when is this going to end?"

"When?"

He stopped and looked down at her intently. Twice they had traversed the terrace, and now they paused at the termination furthest from the house. Just before them a diminuiive flight of stone steps led down to a narrow graveled walk that skirted a velvety bit of lawn, and was in its turn hedged by some close and high-growing shrubs from the "Bellair woods," as they were called. Beyond the steps was a gap in the hedge, and this, cut and trimmed until it formed a compact and beautiful arch, was spanned by a stile, built for the convenience of those who desired to reach the village by the shortest route, the Bellair woods.

"Don t repeat like a parrot, Lucian,"

Cora raised her voice angrily. "I say, when is this to end? and how?"

They were just opposite the gap in the hedge and Lucian, looking down upon Cora, stood facing the opening. As the words crossed her lips, his eyes fell upon a figure just behind her, and he checked the conversation by an involuntary motion of the hand.

The figure came toward them. It was Miss Arthur's French maid, and she carried in her hand a small parcel. Evidently she was returning from some errand to the village. Miss Arthur's maid had black hair, dressed very low on the forehead; eyes of some sort, it is to be presumed, but they were effectually concealed by blue glasses; a rather pasty complexion; a form that might have been good, but if so, its beauties were hidden by the loose and as Cora expressed it, "floppy," style of jacket which she habitually wore. She passed them with a low "*Bon jour, madame*," and hurried up the terrace. At least she was walking swiftly, but not very smoothly, up the terrace when Lucian cast after her a last disapproving glance.

"Your lady's maid is not a swan nor a beauty," he said, as they by mutual consent went down the steps.

Cora made no reply to this, seeming lost in thought. They walked on for a moment in silence.

But Céline Leroque did not walk on. She dropped her package and stooping to recover it, cast a swift glance after the pair. They were sauntering slowly down the hedgerow walk, their backs towards her.

Probably the falling parcel had reminded the French maid of something forgotten, for she turned swiftly, silently, and without any of her previous awkwardness retraced her steps and disappeared beyond the stile.

"What's the row, Co.?" asked Lucian, kicking a pebble with his boot toe. "You are getting restive early in the game. Can't you keep to the track for another two months?"

"No."

"What then?"

"This. We must get that fool out the way."

"Meaning who?"

"She, of course—Ellen Arthur. T woman will make a raving maniac of me two months more."

"By Jove! and of me, too, if I do get out of this."

"We must get rid of her."

"How?"

"I don't know—somehow, anyhow."

"And then?"

"And then"—she gave him a side glanc and laughed unpleasantly.

"And then? You have a plan, m blonde. Out with it; I am a listener."

And he did listen.

Slowly down the hedgerow path they paced, and at the end, halted and stood fo a time in earnest consultation. There was some difference of opinion, but the difference became adjusted. And they turned toward the house, evidently satisfied with the result of the morning's consultation.

Not long after, Miss Arthur's maid returned also.

"I see by the papers that Dr. Le Guise has come back from Europe, Cora," announced Mr. Davlin from his seat at the lunch table that day.

"Dr. Le Guise! how delightful! Now one will not be afraid to be sick—our old family physician, you know," to Miss Arthur; and *so* skilful. He has been in Europe a year. The dear man, how I long to see him!"

"Well! laughed Lucian, "I will carry him any amount of affection, providing i is not too bulky. I find that I must run up to the city to-morrow, and of course will look him up."

"Oh!" eagerly, "and find out if he saw the D'Arcys in Paris; and those delightful Trevanions!" Then, regretfully, "can't you stay another week dear?"

"Out of the question, Co., much as I regret it," glancing expressively at Miss Arthur. "But I shan't forget you all."

"Pray do no," simpered the spinster. "And when do you return?"

"Not for two or three week, I fear. But rest assured I shall lose no time, when once I am at liberty.'

During his lazy good-humoured moments, Mr. Davlin had made most ridiculous love to Miss Arthur, and that lady had not been behind in doing her part. Now, strange to say, the face which she bent over her napkin wore upon it a look, not of sorrow, but of relief. And why?

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS.

"TAKE especial care with my toilet this morning, Céline," drawled Miss Arthur, as she sat before a mirror in her luxuriously appointed dressing-room.

Wise Cora had seen the propriety of giving to this unwelcome sister-in-law with the heavy purse, apartments of the best in the newly fitted-up portion of the mansion.

"I want you to be *especially* careful with my hair and complexion," Miss Arthur continued.

"Yes, mademoiselle," demurely. Then, as if the information might bear upon the question of the toilet, "Does mademoiselle know that Monsieur Davlin left an hour ago?"

"Certainly, Céline, but I expect a visitor. He may arrive at any time to-day, and you must do your very best with my toilet."

"Mademoiselle *est charmante;* slight need of Céline's poor aid," cooed the little hypocrite, and the toilet proceeded.

At length, the resources of art having been exhausted, Miss Arthur stood up, and approved of Céline's handiwork.

"I really do look nicely, Céline, you have done well, very. Now go send me a pot of chocolate and a bit of toast."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"And a bit of chicken, or a bird's wing."

"Oui."

"And a French roll, Céline, with perhaps an omelette."

"Pardonne, mademoiselle, but might I suggest we must not forget this," touching Miss Arthur's tightly laced waist.

"True, Céline, quite right; the toast, then. And, Céline, remain downstairs, and when Mr. Percy comes" (her maid visibly started at the name) "show him into the little parlour, and tell him I am somewhere in the grounds—you understand? Then come and let me know. I prefer to have him fancy me surprised, you see," smiling playfully.

"I see; mademoiselle has *such* tact," and the French maid disappeared.

"Mr. Percy?" muttered the French maid, in very English accents; "I will certainly look for your coming, Mr. Percy. Can it be that I am to meet you at last?"

Mrs. John Arthur was restless that morning. She fidgeted about after the departure of her brother; tried to play the agreeable to her husband, but finding this a difficult task, left him to his cigar and his morning paper, in the solitude of his sanctum, and seizing her crimson shawl, started out for a turn upon the terrace.

The "little parlour," as it was called, commanded a view of one end of the terrace walk, but no portion of it was visible from the immediate front of Oakley mansion, the terrace running across the grounds in the rear of the dwelling, and being shut off from the front by a thicket of flowering shrubs and trees.

The hall facing the front entrance to Oakley was deserted now, save for the figure of Céline Leroque, who was ensconsed in one of the windows thereof. She had been watching there for more than an hour, and Cora had promenaded the terrace half that time, when a gentleman approached the mansion from the front gateway.

Céline's eyes were riveted upon the coming figure, as it appeared and disappeared among the trees and shrubbery along the winding walk. At length he emerged into open space and approached nearer.

Céline Leroque suppressed a cry of astonishment as she anticipated his ring and ushered him in. A very blonde man, with the lower half of his face covered with a mass of yellow waving beard; pale blue, searching, unfathomable eyes; pale yellow hair; a handsome face, the face she had seen pictured in Claire's souvenir!

Céline Leroque led the way toward the little parlour with a heart beating rapidly.

"Miss Arthur is in the grounds," she said, in answer to his inquiry. "I will go and look for her;" and she turned away.

Mr. Percy placed his hat upon a little table, and tossing back his fair hair, said: "I think I can see her now."

Approaching the window he looked down upon the terrace.

Céline looked, too, and catching a gleam of crimson, said: "That is not Miss Arthur."

"Stop a moment, my girl," the man exclaimed.

He was gazing down at Cora, who was walking away from them, with a puzzled look. "Good God!" he ejaculated, as she turned and he saw her face.

He checked himself, and withdrawing hastily from the window, took up his hat as if about to depart. Approaching the window once again, he looked cautiously forth, and seeing Cora still pacing the terrace in evident unconcern, he muttered to himself, but quite audibly: "Thank goodness, she did not see me."

Then turning to Céline: "Girl, who is that woman?"

The girl approached the window; "That, monsieur, is Madame Cora Arthur."

"A widow, eh?"

"Oh no, monsieur. Mr. Arthur is the master of Oakley."

"Oh, and madame—how long has she been his wife?"

"She is still a bride, monsieur."

"Still a bride, is she? How exceedingly pleasant." Mr. Percy had evidently recovered from his panic. "Was she a miss when she married the master of Oakley?"

"Oh, no, monsieur; a widow."

"Widow?" stroking his whiskers caressingly. "What name?"

"Madame Torrance, monsieur."

"Madame Torrance, eh? Well, my good girl, take this," offering a bank note. "I really thought that Madame Torrance, I mean Arthur, was an old friend; however, it seems I was mistaken. Now, my girl, go and tell that lady that a gentleman desires to see her, and do not announce me to Miss Arthur, yet. May I depend upon you?" glancing at her keenly.

"You may, monsieur."

Taking the offered money, she made an obeisance, and withdrew.

The little parlour had but one means of egress—through the door by which Mr. Percy had entered. This door was near the angle of the room; so near that, as it swung inward, it almost grazed against a huge high-backed chair, stiff and grim, but reckoned among the elegant pieces of furniture that are always, or nearly always, uncomfortable. This chair occupied the angle, and behind its capacious back was comfortable room for one or two persons, should they fancy occupying a position so secluded. The act of opening the door completely screened this chair from the view of any person not directly opposite it, until such time as the door should be again closed

As Céline Leroque opened the door and disappeared one might have fancied, had they been gazing at that not-very-interesting object, that the high-backed chair moved ever so little.

Céline flew along the hall and down the stairway, tearing viciously at something as she went. Once in the open air, the brisk autumn breezes caught something from her hand, and sent little fragments whirling through space—paper scraps, that might have been dissected particles of a bank note.

Cora listened in some surprise to the messenger, who broke in upon her medita-

tions with a trifle less of suavity than was usual in Miss Arthur's maid.

"A gentleman, to see me! Are you quite sure, Céline?"

Mrs. Arthur, for various reasons, received but few friends, and Céline thought now that she looked a trifle annoyed.

"Well, Céline, where is the gentleman? Stop," as if struck by a sudden thought, and changing colour slightly, "tell him I am out, but not until I have got up-stairs," she said; "not until I have had an opportunity to see him, myself unseen," she thought.

"But, madame," hesitated Céline, "he is in the little parlour. He saw madame at the upper end of the terrace."

"Confusion! What did he say, girl?" excitedly.

"He said, madame, that he wished to speak with you; that he was an old friend."

"Well, go along," sharply. "I will see the man."

Céline turned about and Cora followed her almost sullenly. She had some apprehension as to this unknown caller, but he had seen her, and whoever he was she must face him, for Cora was no coward.

Céline tripped along thinking intently.

"This man is Edward Percy—Edward Percy, the lover of two women. He was frightened when he saw this Mrs. Arthur, and my words reassured him; why? At the mention of a strange caller, she must needs see him before she permits him an interview—for that is what she meant. Do they know each other? If so, the plot thickens."

Edward Percy had certainly been agitated at sight of Mrs. Arthur, and had as certainly recovered when assured that the lady *was* Mrs. Arthur. He looked the image of content now, as he lounged at the window. Under the blonde moustaches, a smile of cunning and triumph rested; but his eyes looked very blue, very, very calm, very unfathomable.

"Madame Arthur, sir."

Céline opened the door gently, and admits the form of Cora. Then, as the two face each other in silence, the door quietly closes, neither one having glanced toward the girl, who has disappeared.

Cora stands before him, the folds of the crimson shawl falling away from the plump, graceful shoulders, and mingling with the sweep of her black cashmere wrapper in rich, graceful contrast. One fair hand gathers up the crimson fabric, and, instinctively, the other thrusts itself out in a repellant gesture, as the soft voice utters, in tones of mingled hate and fear: "*You!*"

He laughs softly. "Yes, I. I knew you would be delighted." All the time he is gazing at her critically, apparently viewing her loveliness with an approving eye.

And now the woman feels through her whole being but the one instinct—hate. She has forgotten all fear, and stands before him erect, pallid, but with eye and lip expressing the bitterness that rages within her.

"You won't say you are glad to see me? Cruel Alice," he murmurs, plaintively. "And after all these years, too; how many are they, my dear?"

"No matter!" fiercely. "They have given the devil ample time to claim his own, and yet you are upon earth!"

"Yes," serenely; "both of us."

"Both of us, then. How dare you seek me out?"

"My dear wife, I never did you so much honour. I came to this house for another purpose, and Providence, kind Providence, has guided me to you."

The woman seemed recalled to herself. Again the look of fear overspread her face, and looking nervously about her, she said: "For God's sake, hush! What you wish to say, say out, but don't let your voice go beyond these walls."

"Dear Alice, my voice never was vulgarly loud, was it? Recollect, if you please," in an injured tone.

"Well! well! what do you want with me? Percy Jordan, I warn you—I am not the woman you wronged ten years ago."

"No; by my faith, you are a handsomer

woman, and you carry yourself like a duchess. Why didn't you do that when you were Mrs. ——"

"Hush!" she cried; "you base liar, it did not take me long to find you out, even then. Don't forget that you have lived in fear of me for ten long years."

"Just so," serenely; "haven't they been long? But they are ended now, my dear; my incubus is dead and ——"

"But documents don't die," she interrupted; "don't forget that!"

"Not for worlds. For instance, I remember that in a certain church register may be seen the marriage lines of Alice Ford and—ahem—myself. And somewhere, not far away, there must be on record the statement that Mr. Arthur, of Oakley, has wedded the incomparable Mrs. Torrance, a blonde widow—ahem. Where did you go, my dear, when you left my bed and board so very unceremoniously?

"'What had I done, or what hadst thou,
That through this weary world till now
I've walked with empty arms.'"

He stretched out those members tragically.

"And I don't forget that I was never legally your wife, as you had another living," cried Cora, ignoring the latter part of his speech.

"No; of course not. Does Mr. John Arthur know that you were once my——"

"Dupe? no," she interrupted. "Come, time passes; tell what you know, and what you want."

"Softly, softly, Mrs. Arthur. I know enough to insure me against being turned out of Oakley by you; and I want a wife and a fortune."

"I don't understand you."

"Possibly not, Madame Arthur." Then, with mock emotion: "Might I, dare I, ask you to give to my keeping, that incomparable maiden, that houri of houris, your young and lovely sister-in-law, Miss Ellen Arthur?"

The woman looked at him in silence for a time, and then, flinging herself upon a couch, burst into a peal of soft laughter She understood it all now.

"So you are the expected lover!" she ejaculated, laughing afresh; "and she is upstairs, in bright array, waiting for you."

"And I am down here, pleading for permission to address this pearl of price."

Cora arose and gathered her crimson wrap about her shoulders. "And how is it to be between us?" she asked, coolly.

"My sweet Alice, if you were John Arthur's widow instead of John Arthur's wife, it should be as if the past ten years were but a dream."

"Indeed—provided, of course, I were John Arthur's heiress as well."

"Certainly!"

"And how is it that you are once more fortune hunting? Five years ago you inherited wealth sufficient for your every need."

The elegant Mr. Percy went through the pantomine of shuffling and dealing cards, then looked at her with a grimace.

"All?" she inquired, as if the action had been words.

"Every ducat," solemnly. "So what is to be my fate, fair destiny?"

Cora mused, then laughed again. "After all, you may prove a friend in need," she said. "I shan't interfere between you and Miss Arthur; be sure of that."

Then they fell to settling the preliminaries of a siege upon the heart of Miss Arthur, together with other little trifles that occurred as they talked. They had both thrown off their air of hostility, and were seated opposite each other, conversing quite comfortably, when the door swung open, and Miss Arthur stood before them; Miss Arthur, in the full glory of snowy cashmere, with cherry satin facings; Miss Arthur, with curls waving, and in all her war-paint.

The two plotters arose, and saluted her with much empressement.

Miss Arthur advanced a step and stood beside the high-backed chair, one hand still resting upon the door. Percy came toward her with outstretched hands.

"Ah-h-h!" screeched the spinster, "what was that?"

Turning quickly she encountered nothing more formidable than her French maid, who had evidently hurried to the spot, for she breathed rapidly, and said, in an anxious manner:

"Pardon, mademoiselle, it is I—did mademoiselle ring? I thought so."

"You stepped on my dress, girl," said Miss Arthur, sharply. "No, I did not ring; perhaps Mrs. Arthur did."

"I did ring, Ellen," lied Cora, sweetly, wondering what lucky providence sent the girl to the door just then. "I rang for you, as Mr. Percy here, in whom I have discovered a Long Branch acquaintance, would hardly treat me civilly, so impatient has he been to see Miss Arthur."

Miss Arthur looked somewhat appeased.

"You may go, Céline," she said, with her most stately air.

Thus she sailed forward to meet Mr. Percy.

Céline departed, smiling an odd little smile. She went to her own room and sitting down upon the bedside, meditated. Presently she arose, and walking over to her mirror, gazed at her reflected image, and shaking her head at it, murmured:

"What a nice little maid you are, Céline Leroque—and how these people will love you by and by! You now hold in your hands the thread that will unravel this mixture of mystery, and when the reckoning comes, it will not be you that falls."

Thoughtfully she paced the little apartment. By and by she threw herself upon the bed and closed her eyes, still thinking. If she could only know just how these two had separated—Edward Percy and Cora Arthur; and what part Lucian Davlin had played in that separation drama. Did Cora know Lucian ten years ago—did Percy know him for his rival? Suddenly the girl sprang up, and smiting her two palms together, exclaimed:

"If these two men were rivals, then we may yet find a reason why Lucian Davlin should attempt the life of Edward Percy!"

And now what should she do?

Claire Keith's bright face rose before her as she asked herself the question. Claire must be warned and saved; but how? The girl's brow darkened.

"She will scorn the man," she muttered, between pale lips, "and then she will learn to value that other. She will grieve for a time, perhaps, but not for long; then—then she will become *his* wife, while I—What right has she to all the blessings?"

The girl stood motionless, with hands tightly clasped. The conflict lasted but a moment when, in a firm, clear voice she continued:

"It would be base not to save her from this wretch—and save her I will; and I will restore to Olive Girard her husband; is that not payment enough for all they have done for me? But he, Clarence, my hero—why must I yield him up without a struggle? She does not love him; she never will love him if I say the word; she is as generous as—as I am base, I think. No, it is not base to love him, to try to win him. And why not? I must think, think, think."

All that day and night the girl pondered deeply. In the morning she arose weary, unrefreshed.

"I will save Claire Keith from the suffering that befell me," she said. "But she shall not have all the good things of this life, and I none."

CHAPTER XV.

CORA AND THE FRENCH MAID MEASURE SWORDS.

DURING the day, Miss Arthur communicated to her maid the fact that Mr. Percy would remain in Bellair for the present. He was going away for a day on business; then he would return and take up his abode at the Bellair inn.

"Would monsieur be absent tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Then, as mademoiselle would not especially need her, would she graciously give her the day? Her sister had just returned from Paris, and would very soon leave the city *en route* for Washington. Her sister was in the service of Mrs. General Delonne—of course mademoiselle had heard of Madam Delonne; knew her, perhaps. Céline much desired to see this sister, and expected to get some valuable hints from her regarding the very latest French *coiffeurs*, etc. etc. In short, could mademoiselle spare her to-morrow, just for one little day?

Mademoiselle, after due deliberation, perhaps in consideration of the new *coiffeurs*, graciously consented. This matter was settled while the dinner toilet of the lady was in progress; and Céline spared no pains to make her mistress satisfied with herself and all about her.

"How long had Mr. Percy been in the little parlour, Céline, before I came down?" questioned the lady.

She was still a trifle dissatisfied at having found her lover so cosily *tête-à-tête* with her fascinating sister-in-law.

"Oh a very short time, my lady—I mean mademoiselle."

"And how did he meet Mrs. Arthur?" anxiously.

"Madame was just entering from the terrace; they met in the hall," glibly.

"And did they meet like old friends, Céline?"

"Oh, no! mademoiselle! quite formally. At first I fancied he was really displeased at meeting her—but of course mademoiselle knew the reason for that," slily.

"Hush, you foolish girl," said the flattered spinster; "it's all right, of course." And she relapsed into reverie.

Miss Arthur had exhausted her patience waiting for her tardy admirer, and, finding her own apartments dull, had come down to the parlour, thus interrupting the interview, to the disgust of more than one of those interested.

Mr. Percy had many questions yet to propound to his newly-found wife, as he called her, and she, knowing him so well, felt a trifle more uneasy than was comfortable, wondering what use, if any, he intended to make of the small amount of power he still possessed over her. She must hold another interview with him, and that soon. Meantime, she left him to the tender mercies of the happy spinster.

It was late in the evening when she at last found a convenient opportunity, and crossed the hall in the direction of Miss Arthur's dressing-room. She was about to open the door and enter, when her movement was anticipated by Céline, who appeared upon the threshold in hat and shawl.

Mrs. Arthur seemed not at all abashed, but pushing the girl back into the room, stepped in herself and closed the door. "You were going out, Céline?" smiling sweetly.

"Yes, madame," respectfully.

"May I ask where?"

"Certainly, madame. I have leave to go and see my sister to-morrow. I am going to telegraph her that she may expect me. Can I serve madame?"

Madame pondered a moment.

"Céline," she said, abruptly. Why did you pretend to answer a ring this morning, when your mistress came down to the little parlour?"

"I trust madame was not offended," deprecatingly.

"No, no," impatiently; but I want to understand you."

"Madame shall. Madame must know that my mistress is not always smooth in temper?"

"Yes," laughing wickedly.

"This morning she bade me admit the gentleman, tell him she was in the grounds, and then come to her. He came, and almost immediately saw you, madame, walking on the terrace."

"Stop. How did he act when he saw me, Céline?"

The girl looked at her in apparent hesitation "Madame will not be angry with me?'

"No, no,"

"He looked almost frightened, and took his hat, as if about to go."

Cora uttered a low, triumphant, "Ah, did he?"

"Then he called me back as I was leaving the room to summon my mistress, and asked me who you were. I told him. He looked relieved, said he had mistaken you for an old acquaintance, and bade me ask you to come to him, and say nothing to Miss Arthur until he desired it."

"I see; but why did you follow her, when she came down? Did she know we were there?"

"No, madame."

"Then why ——"

"Pardon," with a sidelong glance at her face, "but madame is beautiful, and my mistress is jealous. I thought you might wish me to do as I did, and I desired to serve you, madame."

Cora eyed her keenly. "But why serve me, Céline?"

"Madame has ever been gracious to Céline," said the girl, lowering her eyes. "Even a servant appreciates kindness—my mistress never considers that."

Cora's thought's flew fast. If she could trust this girl, she might make her very useful. She had sought this interview to question her concerning the adventure of the morning, and now might she not be of still more service?

A few more sharply-put questions were asked, and answered with corresponding shrewdness. Then Céline detailed, in her own way, her interview with her mistress on the subject of Mr. Percy's visit.

Cora was at last fully satisfied that, for some reason, Miss Arthur had aroused a feeling of antagonism in the breast of her maid. She resolved to profit by this state of affairs. Accordingly, a few moments later, Céline Leroque flitted out from the house the bearer of two important messages.

One, in writing, was a telegram to be sent to Lucian Davlin.

The other was a verbal message to be delivered, in some way, to Mr. Percy before he quitted the grounds of Oakley.

Pausing at a safe distance from the house, Céline produced from her pocket some waxen matches. She lighted one, having looked cautiously about her, and spreading open the telegram to Mr. Davlin, read these words:

Come down to-morrow without fail. It is most important. C.

"So," muttered Miss Arthur's maid as, flinging away the match, she hurried on her way; "so he must be consulted; he must come down. In the absence of Percy, too. I wonder if he knows, this Percy, that Lucian Davlin at present personates the dutiful brother of his fair lost love." Such a sneer rested on the face of the French maid. "Well! Mr. Davlin must come and, unfortunately, I can't be present at this interview. However, I shall be able to judge pretty accurately by their future movements what was its portent."

Edward Percy, as he chose to call himself, was not aware of the position held by Lucian Davlin in that household. Cora had seized an opportunity to murmur to Miss Arthur a soft warning.

"Ellen, dear!" she had said, "pray don't mention Lucian to Mr. Percy, unless you wish to shorten his stay with us. The fact is, the two had a slight misunderstanding while we were all at Long Branch, about a horse or something. Lucian was very much to blame, I think, but they parted bad friends. It is best never to interfere in men's quarrels, so I have not mentioned Lucian's name to him at all."

Cunning Céline! Her tact had made this explanation seem a quite probable one; and as Miss Arthur certainly had no desire to drive Mr. Percy from Oakley, she assured her "kind, thoughtful Cora," that she would be very guarded and never once mention Mr. Davlin's name in his enemy's presence.

Of this fact, of course, Céline was in

total ignorance, as she proceeded on her way, which was not to the telegraph office; at least not yet.

Hurrying through the Oakley wood in the opposite direction from the village, she crossed the meadow and approached the cottage of Nurse Hagar. A light was dimly visible through the paper curtains, bu no sound was heard from within. The girl listened at the door a moment, and then tapped softly.

Presently slip-shod feet could be heard crossing the uncarpeted floor, and a key creaked in its lock, after which the door opened, a very little way, and the old woman's face peered cautiously out into the night. Then she hastily opened the door wide and admitted the visitor.

"Is it you, dearie?" she asked, rather unnecessarily, surveying her critically by he light of a flaring tallow candle.

"No, Aunt Hagar, it's not I," laughed he girl; "it's Miss Arthur's French maid hat you see before you. And don't drop that tallow on her devoted head," lifting a deprecating hand.

"Umph! we seem in great spirits to-night," leading the way back to the fire-place, beside which stood her easy splint-bottomed chair.

"So we are," assented the girl; "and why shouldn't we be, pray? Aren't we a very happy French maid, and a very skilful one, and a very lucky one?"

"How should I know?" grumbled the old woman; "what do I know? I'm only old Hagar; don't mind explaining anything to me!"

"By which you mean, beware of your wrath if I don't explain things to you; eh, auntie?"

Hagar mumbled something, not exactly intended to be a speech but simply a small growl, illustrative of her mood. Then, as if her dignity had been sufficiently asserted, she relaxed her grimness, and looking kindly down upon the girl, and pushing her toward the big chair, said:

"But law! child, you look fagged out. Sit down, sit down, and don't mind an old woman's grumbling."

"Did I ever?" laughed the girl, sinking into the big chair as if indeed willing to rest. "But I can't sit here long, nursie; my day's work, or rather my night's work, is not yet finished."

"Not yet? Oh, Madeline, my little nursling, give up these wild plans and plots; they will bring you no good."

"Won't they," nodding significantly. "I think they will do me good, and you, too, Nurse Hagar; and before very long too. Why, bless you, these precious plotters won't wait for me to bring them into my net; they are tumbling in head-long—all of them. They are helping me, with all their might, to bring about their own downfall, Hagar," and the girl leaned suddenly forward and looked closely into the old woman's face, "I want you to come back to Oakley."

Hagar started back as if struck by a knife. She was about to open her lips and set free a torrent of indignant protest, when the girl lifted her hand, interrupting her in the old characteristic way.

"Wait until I explain, auntie. I want you to go to Oakley to-morrow, at the hour when Mr. John Arthur is always supposed to be taking his after-dinner nap. Just after dinner, I want you to see Madame Cora; manage it in your own way, but see her you must."

"I won't!" broke in the old woman.

"You will," said the girl, quietly, "when I have told you why."

Drawing her chair close to that occupied by her companion, she resumed in a low voice:

"Yesterday Miss Arthur sent me to the village to purchase some trifling articles for the adornment of her precious person Returning through the woods, I came upon Mr. Davlin and his 'sister,' conversing very earnestly, just at the lower end of the terrace. I arrived at the hedgerow stile just in time to hear madame say, very emphatically, that something must be done immediately. They were going down

the terrace steps when I passed them, pretending to be in a great hurry. As soon as their backs were toward me, I turned quickly, and without noise crossed the stile, followed them on the opposite side of the hedge, and listened."

Here the speaker paused and looked up, but her auditor was gazing moodily into the fire, and never stirred nor spoke.

"Madame was saying," resumed the narrator, "that she was heartily weary of the part she was playing: that its monotony sickened her; that they had secured the victims, and fate had been kind enough to remove the only stumbling block in their path, save the old man himself; that she considered my very sensible demise a direct answer to her pious prayers."

The old woman shuddered and cast a look of horror upon the speaker.

"They had evidently discussed this matter before, and partially settled their plans, only the man seemed to think it was too soon to begin to act. But madame declared that she should do worse if they did not commence operations at once, and finally she overruled him."

"Of course," savagely.

"Of course. Well, I now lost a little of their conversation, but I kept the thread of it. You see, I had to move very cautiously, and sometimes fall behind them a bit, when the leafage became less thick."

Hagar nodded.

"Their plan was a beautiful one, and they have already set in motion."

"Already?"

"Already; don't iterrupt, please; I will tell you how in good time. First, then, madame is to fall ill—not desperately ill, but just ill enough to be interesting, and to alarm the old man. By the way, Mr. Davlin left this morning for the city; that is one move. He is to remain in the city until after the illness of madame, who is to refuse to receive any of the village doctors. Finally, he is to be sent for, and admonished to bring with him their old family physician, who has but just returned from Europe. Well, they come, the brother and the family physician—do you follow me?"

"Yes, yes!" nodding eagerly.

"They come. And the doctor says madame is threatened with a malignant fever, and orders everybody out of the house. It is needless to say that Miss Arthur flies instantly; but *le docteur*, interviewing the half-sick, fidgety old man, discovers that he, too, is threatened with the fever. Of course, he cannot leave then."

Old Hagar's eyes were twinkling, and she was bending forward now in an eagerly attentive attitude. "No," she breathed, unconsciously.

"Well, the heroic brother will refuse to fly from the fever, and will implore the skillful man of medicine to remain and minister unto the sick. The good doctor stays. Of course, such of the servants as are at all likely to prove troublesome, through possessing a trifle more brains than is usually alloted to an idiot, will be kindly told that, rather than endanger their lives, the household will dispense with their valuable services. Then a nurse, perhaps two, will come down from the city, and the plotters have the game in their own hands."

Here the girl paused, and leaned back in her chair as if her story were done.

"And then?" exclaimed Hagar.

"And then!" echoed her companion, bending forward and resting her hand upon the old woman's wrist, "and then madame will recover—but John Arthur will remain an invalid and a prisoner! It will be said in the village that the fever has affected his brain, and his unpopularity, arising from the fact that he has always shunned and scorned the village folk, will insure them against intrusive investigators. Auntie, they have hatched a pretty plot."

"But," objected Hagar, "they will have to stay at Oakley, if he is to be a prisoner They won't dare leave him with keepers and ——"

"True," the girl interrupted. "I don't

know how they will manage the rest; but having settled this much, madame and her "brother' paused at the end of the path. I saw her as she looked up into her face, and this is what she said: 'When he is once a prisoner, what could be more natural than a crazy, sick old man should *die* some day?" Then the man replied, 'Nothing,' and they both returned to the house, without another word."

For some moments silence reigned in Hagar's dwelling. The old woman seemed either unable, or unwilling, to utter a word of comment upon the story to which she had been so attentive a listener.

Céline at length arose and said, as she began pacing to and fro before the old woman. "Well, have you anything to say to this?"

"Yes," quietly.

"Then why don't you speak out? Are you horribly shocked?"

"No."

"No? Well, so much the better!"

Hagar arose, pushed back her chair, crossed the room, and, pulling back the curtain, looked out into the night. Then turning her inscrutable old face upon the girl she said, quite calmly:

"Why should not others measure out to John Arthur the same bitter draught that he filled for your mother years ago? Bah! it is only retribution!"

"True," said the girl, sternly. Then, in a guarded tone: "And you would make no attempt to overturn their finely laid plans?"

"I? *No!*" fiercely. "You? I thought you wanted revenge."

"And so I do, and will have it."

"How, then?"

"Will you go to Madame Arthur."

"What for?"

"Ah, now you reason. I will tell you."

Hurriedly she unfolded her plan; and after some differences of opinion, dame Hagar agreed to play her part in the coming drama. Having finally arranged Hagar's *rôle* to their mutual satisfaction, Céline hurriedly recounted her day's adventures saying by way of *finale:*

"So now you see, nursie, I must hasten and send madame's message on its way. I shall depend upon you to tel. me if Mr. Davlin comes to Bellair to-morrow, for I have a fancy that madame will manage in some way, to prevent his coming to the house, as it was fully settled that he was not to appear at Oakley until summoned to his sister's sick-bed."

"I can easily learn if he appears at the Bellair station."

"Exactly," that is all I wish to know. Now I must go and waylay Mr. Percy. So good night, auntie, and cheer up; our time is coming fast.'

"And trouble coming, too; God help us."

The girl turned upon her swiftly, with flashing eyes. "Are you afraid? Do you want to give it up?"

"I am afraid for you. But give up now; never!"

"Brave old nursie!"

The girl flung both arms about the old woman, and kissed her withered cheeks

"Never fear for me; my star is rising. Don't forget your mission, auntie; good-night."

The "good-night" came back over her shoulder, as the girl was hurrying down the cottage steps, and Hagar closed the door behind her retreating figure.

CHAPTER XVI.

FACE TO FACE.

It is surprising to note how many pretexts a resolute, husband-hunting spinster can find for keeping a victim at her side, long after his soul had left her, and gone forth with yearning for a downy couch, a fragrant cheroot, or a fairer face.

Edward Percy could be agreeable, for a reasonable length of time, to a very ugly woman. But even he felt himself an injured man when, at a late hour, he said good-night for the eleventh time to his fair

enslaver—literally an enslaver, he thought. As the door of Oakley manor actually and audibly closed behind him, he heaved a sigh of gratification, and strode rapidly down the winding avenue.

When the first group of trees had sheltered him from the view of the infatuated spinster, should she still be gazing after him, Mr. Percy paused, and standing in the shadow, produced a cigar and was proceeding to light it, when a hand fell lightly upon his arm, and he turned with a confused idea that she had followed him, and was about to lead him back a prisoner. But the figure that he dimly saw was, certainly not that of Miss Arthur.

"Pardon, monsieur! but I have a message for you."

"Ye gods!" ejaculated the aggrieved man.

Evidently the girl interpreted his thoughts, for she stifled a laugh as she said quickly: "Not from Miss Arthur, monsieur; but from madame."

"Oh from madame," drawing a long breath. "Well, even madame will be a blessed relief; out with it girl."

"Madame will be grateful I am sure," said the girl mockingly. "Madame desires a word with you—now, to-night. Will you follow me?"

"Where?"

"To madame; she will be in the terrace arbour directly."

"Oh, very well," replacing his cigar in his pocket; "lead on, then."

Céline flitted on before, until the arbour became dimly visible down the pathway. Then she paused, pointed it out to her companion, and said: "Madame will soon join you there, sir. Now I must hasten to my mistress; I have kept her waiting too long."

With a low mischievous laugh she darted away in the direction of the house.

Percy turned and gazed after her; then followed a few paces and watched again, until she disappeared under a wide portico. Heaving a sigh of relief he turned back toward the arbour.

"I want no eavesdropping," he muttered: "and that minx might listen if she had time. She is no more a French maid than I am; she forgot her *monsieur* just now. But a sham maid is very appropriate for a sham maiden; now for Alice;" and he entered the arbour.

Had Mr. Percy been able to follow the retreating footsteps of the objectionable French maid, however, he might have found occasion to change his opinion of her lack of time for eavesdropping, and there was excellent opportunity for its practice about the shrubbery-surrounded arbour.

Meantime Ellen Arthur, having reluctantly bidden her "blonde demigod" a last good-night, sought her chamber, swelling with satisfaction, and feeling somewhat hungry. Passing the door of her sister-in-law's rooms, she encountered Sarah, the romantic housemaid, who was just entering, bearing wine and a tiny glass. Glancing within, she encountered the gaze of Cora, who stood holding in her hand some black lace drapery.

"Horribly late, isn't it?" yawned that lady, nodding good-naturedly. "Set down the wine, Sarah, and then you may go. I'm so dismally slumbersome that if I keep you to help me, I shall fall asleep on your hands. Have some wine, Ellen?"

"No, thanks," said the spinster, If you don't want Sarah, she may bring me up a nice lunch as soon as possible. I won't detain you any longer, good-night."

And Miss Arthur, who had meditated entering and giving Cora the benefit of some of her maiden dreams and fancies, marched away, a trifle offended at the manner in which her sleepy sister-in-law had anticipated and warded off the interview. Cora's good-night floated after her as she sailed down the corridor. Then she heard the door closed and the bolt shot into the socket. A little later, the door opened noiselessly, and a female figure glided down the dark stairways out into the night, and toward the arbour.

"Céline shall undo my hair," Miss

Arthur thought, "and I'll have her try that new set of braids and puffs, if it is late. I don't feel as if I could sleep."

But Céline was not dutifully waiting in her mistress's dressing-room.

Sarah appeared with the lunch, and offered her services, but was summarily dismissed, for Miss Arthur did not deem it wise to initiate the house servants into the fearful and wonderful mysteries of her toilet. Therefore, she lunched in solitude and disgust, but heartily, notwithstanding, having just put off her very elaborate, but rather uncomfortable evening dress and donned a silken gown, acting as her own maid.

Then she fidgeted herself into a most horrible temper, and sat deliberately down before the grate in a capacious dressing-chair, determined to wait until the girl came, and deliver a most severe and stately reprimand, the exact words of which she had already determined upon.

The lady, sitting thus with her feet on the fender, her hands comfortably clasping the big arms of the dressing chair, and her head lolling rather ungracefully over its back, fell into slumber.

If Mrs. John Arthur had made a midnight appointment with Lucifer, she would have fortified herself for the encounter by making a "stunning" toilet. It was one of her fixed principles—she had fixed principles—never to permit friend or foe of the male persuasion to gaze upon her charms when they would show at a disadvantage. So when she entered the arbour, which was suffused with a soft moonlight glow from a heavily-shaded lamp, for the arbor stood among dense shrubbery, and but for this lamp would have been in Egyptian darkness, she was indeed a personification of loveliness.

Ungracious as was his mood, Percy would not not have been a beauty-adoring mortal if he had not paid involuntary tribute to the charms of the woman who was his bitterest foe. Gazing down upon her a moment, he said in his soft legato:

"I am almost angry at you for being so beautiful, after having taken yourself to other lovers, *Ma belle.*"

The woman smiled triumphantly, as she threw herself into an easy chair, and said in her softest, sweetest tone: "And did you expect me to go mourning for you all these years, sir?"

"I don't think you were ever the woman to do that;" dropping lazily into a rustic seat near her. "May I smoke?"

Cora nodded.

"Are you sure we are quite safe here?" looking about him. "Somehow, I am suspicious of that sharp French maid."

"Quite sure," nodding again. "Mr. Arthur was in bed before I came out; Miss Arthur was ordering up a lunch to her room, and the French maid must needs be in attendance for an hour or more; and besides, I know she is not at all dangerous. None of the other servants ever have occasion to come here, and most of them are in bed by now."

"So your charming sister-in-law eats, does she? After parting from me, too ugh!"

"Eats? I should think so," laughing softly; "in her own room, when her stays are not too tight."

"Spare me!"

He held up both hands in mock deprecation; then, dropping his bantering tone, said, as he puffed at his cigar:

"But now to business. You did not come out here in such bewitching toilet to tell me that my charmer eats?"

"Hardly," with a pretty shrug.

"For what, then?"

"To come to an understanding with you," coolly.

"As how?" in the same tone.

"As so our future standing with each other."

"I thought that was settled to-day?"

"Did you? I don't think it was settled."

"Well, what remains, fair Alice?"

"Will you drop that name?"

"For the present, yes; but with reluctance."

"Oh, certainly!" bitterly. "Now, what are we to be henceforth?"

"Friends, of course," knocking the ashes off his cigar.

"You and I may be allies; we can never be friends," she said, scornfully.

"Don't trouble yourself to be insulting, Mrs.—a—Arthur."

"Then don't make me remember how I have hated you!"

"Have you really hated me? How singular."

"Very!" sarcastically; then: "If you don't drop that disagreeable tone we shall quarrel. I wish to know what you want with Ellen Arthur."

"Shade of my grandmother! If you don't drop that disagreeable name, I shall expire. Haven't I had enough of her for one day? Alice, I know revenge is sweet, but spare me."

"Bother! I must talk about her, else how can we settle anything? Do you suppose I am going to allow that sweet girl to be deceived?" This with mock indignation.

"Oh, no; certainly not! Well, if I must, I must. First, then ——"

"First, what position do you intend to take towards me?"

"That depends upon yourself."

"On conditions?"

"On conditions."

"Name them."

"I am to be received as an honoured guest whenever I shall choose to visit Oakley."

"Well."

"Next, you are to do all in your power to further my suit with Miss--you know"

"That's an easy task."

"Lastly, you are to promise me not, now or at any future time, to declare to any one aught you may know that might to be my disadvantage."

"That is to say, I am not to tell Ellen Arthur, or others, that you have two wives ——"

"Softly; one, my dear, *one*. Mrs. Percy Jordan, number one, is dead; you alone are left. You see, Alice, my dear, the thing is reversed. You have two husbands now, while I ——"

"Will have two wives as soon as you can get them!"

"Just so."

"And what guarantee have I that you will not betray me to Mr. Arthur?"

"The very best thing in the world; mutual interest."

Cora pondered. "I don't see but that you are right," she said, at last. "It certainly will not be to your interest to attempt to annoy me now, but how long is this truce to last?" looking at him keenly.

Percy smoked away in tranquil silence.

"Of course, I understand what you mean by a marriage with Miss Arthur," scornfully. "How long will it take you to squander her dollars? And after that, what will you do?"

"Question for question, fair cross-examiner; how long do you intend remaining so quietly here, the bond slave of this idiotic old man? And what will you do when this play is played out?"

"Because I ran away from a profligate young husband, who had decoyed me into an illegal marriage—illegal for me, but sufficiently binding to have put you in the penitentiary for a bi ——"

"Don't say it, my dear; don't. It's an ugly word, and, after all, are we not both in the same boat?"

"No," angrily. "Do you think I have been so poorly schooled during these years that you can make me think now that you have any hold upon me? Bah! your case is but a flimsy one. When you deceived me into a marriage with you, you had already another wife. You hid me away in a suburban box of a cottage, fancying I would be content, like a bird in a gilded cage. You never dreamed that meek little *I* would follow you, and find out from the woman's own lips that she had a prior claim upon you!"

"Candidly, I didn't credit you with so much pluck," said Percy, cooly.

"No! and when I charged you with your

perfidy, and wept and upbraided you, and then became pacified when you told me that every proof of your marriage with that other was in your control, you did not dream that I would feign submission until I had gained possession of the proofs of both your marriages, and then run away?"

"And succeed in baffling my search for ten long years," supplemented he, grandiloquently. "No, fair dame, I did not."

"Your search, indeed! It was not a very eager one."

"Well, in truth it was not. The fact is, your beauty entrapped me into that very foolish marriage; but I was a trifle weary of blonde loveliness in tears, etc., so I didn't get out the entire police force, you see."

"And you wouldn't have found me if you had."

"Indeed! why not?"

"Because, if it will afford you any satisfaction to know at this late stage of the game, I sailed for Europe the very day I quitted your house."

"No!" opening his eyes in genuine astonishment. "Had it all cut and dried? Well, I like that! Why, little woman, if you had only developed one-half the pluck latent in you, before you flitted, I would never have given you 'just cause,' etc., for leaving me."

The woman smiled triumphantly, but made no other answer.

"Well, what next? I am really becoming interested in your career."

"Sorry I can't gratify your curiosity. My career has been a very pleasant one—seeing the world; generally prosperous. And this brings me back to the starting point: why should you think, because I left you with good cause, ten years ago, that I must necessarily forsake, sooner or later, a husband who is kindness itself, and who leaves no wish of mine ungratified?"

"First reason," checking them off on his fingers: "Because you don't love this old man, and love is the only bond that such women as you will not break."

"Thanks!" ironically, bending her head.

"Second, because a dull country house, be it ever so elegant, will not long satisfy you as an abiding place. I have not forgotten your girlish taste for pomp, pageant and all manner of excitement; a taste that has doubtless become fully developed by now. Third, because you have, at this present moment, a lover whom you prefer above all others, and to whom you will flee sooner or later."

"Perhaps you can substantiate that statement," sneered Cora.

"Well, not exactly; but I know women. My dear, say what you please to me, but don't expect to be believed if you will insist upon doing the devoted wife."

"I insist upon nothing," said Cora, rising, "and I have not time for many more words. Let us come to the point at once: With my life, after I left you, you have nothing to do: you know nothing of it now, and you will learn no more from me. Of you, I know this much. I know that you clung, after your fashion, to the skirts of your unfortunate wife, spending her income and making her life miserable. I know that six years ago you inherited a fortune from a distant relative. I know that from that time you utterly neglected your wife, who had been an invalid for years; and that soon after she died, heart-broken and alone."

Percy turned upon her, and scrutinized her face keenly; then, coming close to her, said, meaningly: "And then I wonder that you did not come back to me."

For a moment the woman seemed confused, and off her guard. But she had not sought an interview with this man without fully reviewing her ground.

"I had ceased to care for you," she said, lifting her unflinching eyes to his face; "and I did not need your money. Come, enough of the past; you have squandered your fortune, and now you want another. You want to put yourself still more into my power by marrying a third wife—so be it; I consent."

"Not so fast. You are first to promise me to place in my hands, on my 'marriage

morn,' those unpleasant little documents which you hold against me. In return for which you will receive a sum of money, the amount of said sum to be hereafter arranged. Then we go our separate ways."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then, painful as it is, I must do my duty. You are to give me your answer when I return to Bellair; no time for tricks, mind. If the answer is 'no,' then I interview Mr. John Arthur."

"And you return?——"

"The day after to-morrow."

"Then you shall have my answer. Until then——"

She swept him a stately courtsey, which he returned with a most elaborate bow.

Without another word from either, they separated; she gliding swiftly and silently towards the house, he going once more in the direction of Bellair village.

How long she had slept it never afterward occurred to Miss Arthur to inquire. Something recalled her from the land of visions, and starting up in her chair she saw Céline, standing demurely before her, her face wreathed in smiles, and no signs of any uncanny adventure lingering about her.

Beholding her safe and sound Miss Arthur began to pour out upon the luckless head of Céline, the vials of wrath prepared for her benefit.

The girl listened with a face indicative of some secret source of amusement. Noting her look of evident unconcern, and the laughter she seemed vainly striving to keep under, Miss Arthur brought her tirade to an abrupt termination, and demanded to know what Miss Céline Leroque saw, in her appearance, that was so very ludicrous.

Whereupon Miss Céline Leroque dropped upon a hassock, at the feet of her irate mistress, and laughed outright—actually laughed unreservedly, in the presence and despite the rage of the ancient maiden!

Then observing that she was preparing another burst of wrath the girl appeared to be struggling for composure, and vainly endeavouring to articulate something, of which Miss Arthur could only catch the name, "Mr. Percy." Thereupon she fairly bounced out of her chair, demanding to know "what on earth" Mr. Percy had to do with her maid's reprehensible conduct.

"Oh, mademoiselle, everything!" gasped Céline. "Only let me explain, and mademoiselle will laugh, too. Oh, *Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu!*"

Calming herself by a violent effort, Céline told her story, and its magic dispelled the wrath of her much neglected, sorely aggrieved mistress. Such a pretty little story it was, interspersed with sly looks, knowing nods, and rippling bursts of laughter. Listened to with, first, disdainful silence; then, growing interest; last, spasmodic giggles, *apropos* ejaculations, and much blushing and maidenly confusion.

"You see, mademoiselle, after you had gone down, I went to my room, to take just a few little stitches upon some of my poor garments, that I must wear to-morrow. I don't know how it was, but I sat on my bedside thinking, after it was done, and fell off asleep."

"Off the bed?"

"Oh! no, no, mademoiselle; off into sleep, I mean. When I awoke I was anxious to know how much time I had slept away, and came down to your apartments. You were still in the drawing-room, and I passed on to the kitchen, surprised to find that it was very late. "I will hasten," I thought, "and can so go to the village, and telegraph my sister before my mistress rings for me; for I didn't think," with a sly look, "that you would be at liberty *very* early in the evening. The—what you name him?—a—operateur, was out, and I had to wait a little time. Coming back so late, I became afraid of the woods, and took the path along the highway. Entering at the front and coming up the avenue, I was about to pass around by the east walk to the side entrance when,——" stifling a laugh.

"Well?" impatiently.

"When the front door opened, and I, standing in the shadow, saw the light fall upon the face and figure of Monsieur Percy."

"Yes; go on."

"I mention this, mademoiselle, only to show you how I know so positively that it *was* monsieur who—oh! oh!" laughing again softly.

"Who?" with increased impatience; who did what, girl?" eyeing her suspiciously.

Céline composed herself and continued: "Seeing monsieur, I stopped, for I did not wish him to discover me abroad so late. So I stood in the thick shade until he should have passed. He came slowly toward me and, just about four paces from my hiding-place, paused, turned and looked back at the house. I could see him gazing toward the upper windows, and presently I saw your shadow upon the blind as you entered your dressing-room. The light shone out from your window, too; and after looking for a while, I heard him murmur to himself: 'That must be her window; I believe I am bewitched, for I can't bear to lose its light,' and then——"

"Stop laughing, you ridiculous girl! And what then?"

"And then, mademoiselle, he began walking up and down within sight of your window——"

"Ah!" rapturously.

"Oui; and I—oh, mademoiselle, he was in the very path that I must take to approach the side entrance. And he walked and walked, and I waited and waited. Then I thought I would try getting around by the other way, and creep up carefully from the terrace. So I crept along to the other side, back of the arbour, and up the terrace, and managed to reach the entrance unseen. *Mon Dieu*, mademoiselle, the door was locked! I was shut out! What was I to do then? I sat me down in the shadow of the portico and waited once more. After a terribly long time I could see that he was not moving up and down. I peeped cautiously, and he seemed to be departing. Then I came out stealthy as a cat, and found that he was going away, and the reason——"

"The reason?"

"Oui, mademoiselle; the light in your room had disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"Oui, mademoiselle. Then I bethought me there might yet be a chance. I came up to the front entrance and tried the door. It was not locked. My heart leaped for joy. I blessed the carelessness of the servants, and stole cautiously in. I came to this room. All was dark; but the coals there showed me your figure in the chair. I could not mistake the graceful outlines of mademoiselle. I entered very quietly, relighted your lamp—some little breeze must have flared it out while you slept. I was looking at you, and wondering what you would say if you knew how nearly crazy with love you had driven that stately, handsome Monsieur Percy, when you awoke."

It is needless to say that, long before Céline had finished her recital, her mistress was in the best of humours. Indeed, Céline's volubly uttered, intensely flattering, highly probable recital, had an exhilarating effect upon her; so much so, that the lady found sleep now quite impossible. So poor Céline was doomed, after all, to build the new braids and puffs into a wonderful edifice upon the head of Miss Arthur, and to repeat over and again the sweet story of "how he loved her."

The "wee sma'" hours were beginning to lengthen once more when Céline was released from duty, and went wearily up to her room; wearily, yet with undimmed eyes, and the mischievous dimples still lurking about the corners of her mouth.

She muttered: "Bah! it is better than sleep, after all; if only the others were as easily duped as she!"

By which words, a listener might have been led to suppose that Céline Leroque had been practising deception upon some confiding individual.

CHAPTER XVII.

GATHERING CLUES.

CLAIRE had been absent all the morning, had gone to make some call; at least she had said to Olive, at breakfast, "I think I will take the ponies, Olive, and drive into the city this morning. It is nice out of doors, and I have made no calls since I came here."

Olive Girard sat alone in her cosy drawing-room. She had been reading, but the book was somehow not in tune with her mind or mood. She had allowed it to fall at her feet, where it lay, half opened, while she drifted away from the present in sorrowful reverie. Lifting her eyes, she saw a cab drive away from the villa gate, and a form hurrying along the marble pathway. Springing up, Olive herself threw open the door, and clasped her arms about—Miss Arthur's French maid! who returned the caress with much enthusiasm.

"Madeline, my dear child, how glad I am to see you!"

"Even in this disguise?" laughed the girl.

"Even in blue glasses, and that horrid jacket," smiled Olive. "What an ugly thing it is. Come and take it off, *ma belle*; do," leading the way up the stairs.

"I come, autocrat, and I shall much enjoy getting out of this head-gear," shaking her bewigged head. Then abruptly, "Where's Claire?"

"Out for a drive and some calls," without looking back. "How surprised and glad she will be to see you. Now, come in and make a lady of yourself once more." She led the way into Madeline's room. "Are you tired, dear?"

"Not at all."

"Then come into my boudoir when you are dressed, and we will have a cosy chat while waiting for Claire."

"I won't be long," responded the girl. "I have a good many things to say to you, which had better be said before Claire comes."

"Very well; I await your ladyship," and Olive closed the door, leaving Miss Arthur's maid alone.

"I thought so," muttered she, tearing off the blue glasses; "she has gone to meet Edward Percy. Poor dupe! it is indeed time to act."

She discarded the ill-fitting jacket, flung away the ugly black wig, and, in a very few moments, stood arrayed in a pretty, neatly fitting gown, glowing and lovely—Madeline Payne once more.

"I wonder if I shall see or hear of *him*," she whispered to herself as she crossed to Olive's boudoir. "Oh, if I could! It would be one ray of sunlight only to clasp his hand!"

Olive had been informed of all that Madeline herself knew, of the doings at Bellair, at the time when the girl went down, disguised as Céline Leroque. Now, therefore, Madeline lost no time in making Olive acquainted with, at least a part of, the events that had transpired during her sojourn in the Oakley mansion, in the capacity of maid. Of Edward Percy she said not a word, for reasons of her own, wishing to keep all knowledge of him from Olive for the present.

"You see, I was just in time, Olive," she supplemented, when Mrs. Girard had expressed her astonishment at the startling revelations of the past four weeks. "I had not an hour to lose in setting my snare for these plotters. They little dream what is in store for them. Poor Kitty! I feel like a wretch when I think of the advantage I took of her, by making her poor dead body a weapon, as one might say, against a villian whom she would never have lifted a finger to injure in her life. But I could see no other way. Do you know, Olive, they are going to erect a stone over her, bearing my name?"

Olive looked up in surprise. "No! is it possible?"

"Yes, quite. I fancy John Arthur thinks he will feel more thoroughly assured of my demise, when he can see my name on a marble slab."

"Now, tell me what especial purpose brought you up to town to-day."

Madeline moved restlessly in her chair. "A medley," she said, laughing uneasily. "A woman's reason; things being quiet, I wanted recreation, and to tell you of my success thus far. Then, a detective's reason; to get from you some information bearing upon your own affairs, as connected with Lucian Davlin. Then I want to see Dr. Vaughan, in his professional capacity. But mind, Olive, not a word to him of my discoveries just yet."

"Certainly not, if you do not wish it,"

And this was all the mention made by either of Clarence Vaughan.

"You see," began Madeline, after a brief silence, "Mrs. John Arthur and her quondam brother, hold occasional private interviews. As they generally prove interesting, I make it a point to be present whenever possible. Now, from some chance words dropped at different times, I have been led to think that if I were more fully informed in regard to this Percy, I might find the missing link. Indeed, I may tell you I have found a clue, just the shadow of something that, if I could develop it, might prove of wonderful value to both of us."

"Oh! if you could find out anything that would throw light upon this dark wrong they have done Philip, these men ——"

"Well, Olive, I think we may hope. Now may I begin to cross-question you?"

Olive smiled sadly. "Go on, my little lawyer."

First then, were you personally acquainted with this Percy?"

"No."

"You have seen him?"

"At the trial; yes."

"Describe him."

"A blonde man, handsome, some would call him, with a soft, languid voice. I did not observe further."

"Would you know him if you saw him again?"

"Certainly. His was a rather uncommon face, and then the association ——"

"Just so," interrupting her; "and would he know you?"

"I think not. I was heavily veiled, by Philip's order."

"Now, try and recall all that Philip has told you of this man."

"They were college students together. Philip said that Percy was indolent and vain, and too fond of female society of any sort or grade. He made wonderful progress in such studies as he chose to apply himself to, and, had he been less of a sybarite, might have obtained high rank as a scholar. But he was erratic, full of queer conceits, and never made himself popular with either professors or students."

"Social standing not good, eh? Now, as to his finances."

Olive looked somewhat surprised at this question, but replied: "His parents were not well to do, but he was a favourite with a rich old uncle, who paid his college expenses and made him a liberal allowance. However, he fell into disgrace just before his class graduated, and his uncle cast him off. He never took his degree."

"What was the occasion of his disgrace?"

"Some scandalous affair with a mechanic's daughter; the particulars I did not learn."

"Of course not. They are of no consequence. This happened—how long ago?"

Olive mused. "Philip is now thirty-three; this was twelve years ago."

"Good! Did he hear of Mr. Percy after that?"

"Yes; in less than a year, he married a wealthy woman, ten years his senior, and a widow, so it was reported. Percy, it is said, denied this marriage, and continued to live and go and come, like a bachelor. If the marriage ever occurred, it was kept, for some reason, very much under the rose. Be this as it may, Percy was always provided with money from some source. He used to gamble sometimes, but was not an habitual gamester. Philip said he was

too much of a sybarite and ladies' man to be wedded to such sports."

"Yet he played with Lucian Davlin, and lost heavily?"

"True."

"Well, is this all you have to tell of Mr. Percy?"

"Not quite. About a year before the catastrophe of the hunting party, the uncle who had cared for him during his college career, died. Percy inherited his wealth, the old man, after all, making his will in favour of his graceless nephew." Olive paused for a moment, then added, "I believe that is all I can tell you of this man. I have not seen or heard of him since poor Philip was sent to prison."

Madeline sat gazing abstractedly into the grate fire, her hands clasped in her lap, working restlessly, as was their habit, when she was thinking deeply. Suddenly a sharp exclamation broke from her lips, and Olive turned towards her a look of surprised enquiry. But Madeline was clasping and unclasping her hands nervously, with eyelashes lowered, and brow knitted in a frown.

"Olive," she said, after a long cogitation, "You have put into my hands another thread, a very valuable one. Don't ask me any questions now; I want to get my ideas into shape."

Olive's face wore an anxious look, but she had learned the lesson of patient waiting, so she quietly acquiesced, and then a long silence fell between them.

Madeline resumed the conversation, or rather recommenced it. She made no further mention of that part of the subject nearest the heart of Olive Girard. She made enquiries as to affairs and recent events at the village, talked of Claire, and finally said:

"Olive, I want you to go out with me during the day, and perhaps we had better go early. I must return to Bellair by to-morrow morning's train, you know."

"Yes; and I am sorry that you stay with us such a very short time. Where do you intend going, Madeline?"

"To a detective—that is, if you will repeat your generous offer, which I so cavalierly declined not long ago, to be my banker for an indefinite time."

"Gladly, dear child; now you are beginning to be sensible. But the detective—may I venture to enquire?" with assumed hesitation.

"You may," laughed Madeline. "And don't give me credit for all the ingenuity. True, I have racked my poor feminine brain and feminine instinct, coupled with some knowledge obtained with some keen experience with Treachery, Despair and Hate. These grim but very efficient instructors have aided me materially, simple, inexperienced girl as I was so recently—or so long ago as it seems to me. And good old Aunt Hagar, who has been in this woful world many years—years full of vicissitudes, and sharp life-lessons—is my counsellor and adviser. She aids me greatly with her shrewdness, and knowledge of the world and the folk in it. So we have discussed this point together and concluded that, in order to leave no loopholes open in our nice little net, we had better have the movements of Mr. Lucian Davlin closely watched while he is in the city."

"To discover ——"

"Who he calls upon, and what manner of man he will choose to assume the *rôle* of 'physician from Europe,' etc. Without putting the full facts of the case into the hands of the officer, we will arrange to know all about the man who will help Davlin carry out their last scheme. No train shall leave the city on which he would, by any possibility, set out for Bellair accompanied by this sham physician, without the knowledge of our man, or men, of skill. All discoveries made are to be reported, through you, to Mademoiselle Céline Leroque, who will receive said reports in *propria persone*, at the Bellair post-office. Then I must prefer a request, that Dr. Vaughan will hold himself in readiness to come to Oakley, should I find it necessary to summon him, accompanied

by another physician, or not, as shall be hereafter decided."

"I don't just see how all this is to end, but these two steps appear to be in the right direction. I am ready to undertake your commissions, and to act as your banker to the fullest extent of your needs."

After a few more words they decided that, as Clare did not return, and time was precious, they would order a carriage immediately after luncheon, and pay a visit to the detective forthwith. Accordingly, half-an-hour earlier than usual, a light repast was served, and sparingly partaken of. Then having left a message for Miss Keith, who was momentarily expected, the two friends drove into the city.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HAND OF FRIENDSHIP WIELDS THE SURGEON'S KNIFE.

RETURNING two hours later, they found Claire impatiently waiting their arrival, radiantly beautiful, and overflowing with joy at sight of her beloved Madeline.

"You delightfully horrible girl!" she exclaimed, after greetings had been exchanged, and they had all seated themselves in the drawing-room. "To think that you are growing more lovely every day, and that you go and hide all your beauty under an old fright of a wig, nasty blue spectacles, and deformities of jackets! I declare it's too bad! And then to wait on an old spinster who wears no end of false hair, and false teeth, and false —— "

"Puzzled already. So much for not being a lady's maid; Now, I can enumerate every 'falsehood' assumed by that lady."

Then Madeline gave a ludicrous description of Miss Arthur and her peculiarities, causing even grave Olive to laugh heartily, and Claire to exclaim that she should watch the advertisements, and try playing ladies' maid herself.

Madeline once more recounted, in brief, the state of affairs now existing at Oakley, or as much as she had told Olive, during which recital impulsive Claire kept up a running fire of comments, indicative of surprise, indignation, disgust and very one-sided interest.

"I never heard of such a nest of vultures," she exclaimed, excitedly, when Madeline had completed her story. "Why, it's worse than a chapter out of a French drama. Goodness gracious, Madeline Payne, I only wish I could help you to deal out justice to these wretches! Where is my fairy godmother now, that she don't come and convert me into a six-foot brother, to take some of this burden out of your little weak hands?"

"Not so weak as you may think, you little warrior. These hands," holding them up to view, "have a very strong cause, let me tell you—and you think you would like to help me?" laughing oddly.

"Wouldn't I!" with a fierce nod that made her companions laugh again.

The afternoon was wearing away, and Madeline began to grow restless, at finding no opportunity of saying a word in private to Claire. At last fortune favoured her. Olive, seeing her gardener digging about a little summer-house, which was a favourite retreat on a warm afternoon, bethought herself of a plan for adding to its comfort, by laying down certain vines, etcetera, for next season's growing. So she bade the girls note how she should have improved her arbour by another season, and hurried out to begin an argument, that from previous experience she knew would be hotly contested.

This was Madeline's opportunity. And as soon as Olive was out of hearing, she turned to Claire saying:

"Claire, I have not told you, nor Olive, all that I have discovered. For reasons, which you will understand later, I have thought it best to make them known to you first. We must invent some excuse for absenting ourselves from the parlour for a while."

Claire looked grave and somewhat startled for an instant, but recovering her

composure she said, simply: "I am at your disposal, dear."

"I think I had better go to my room and lie down," meaningly. "Tell Olive, when she comes in, that I feel fatigued, and have gone to my room to rest. Then you had better plead letters to write, and follow me. Can you manage it?"

"Easily," smiled Claire. "Why, Bonnie Aileen, this becomes more and more mysterious and interesting."

"Wait before you pass judgment; now I am gone."

Madeline quitted the drawing-room and sauntered leisurely upstairs.

When Olive reappeared, Claire carried out the little programme, as arranged, and hastened to join Madeline, musing as she went:

"What could have induced that odd darling to confide in stupid little me, while she leaves wise, thoughtful Olive in the dark?"

Madeline was pacing the floor when Claire entered the room. She motioned her to a chair, and pushed the bolt in the door, thus rendering intrusion impossible.

"What *can* you be thinking of, Madeline, with that gloomy face?" exclaimed Claire, nestling into an easy chair as she spoke.

"I am thinking, Claire," replied Madeline, gazing down at her sadly, "of the first time I ever saw your sister, and of the errand on which she came to me. How full of hope I was that morning! How radiant the day seemed, and how confident I was of happiness to come: as confident as you are to-day, Claire, darling."

There was something in Madeline's tone that sounded almost like pity, as she uttered these last words. Claire started and coloured, but still was silent.

"Olive did a brave, generous deed, but at that time I almost hated her for it," musingly.

"Oh, no, Madeline," interposed Claire, "you don't mean just that, I am sure. You never really hated our noble, unhappy Olive,"

"I felt very wicked, I assure you," smiling faintly. Then, abruptly: "How should you have felt, similarly placed?"

"I?" wonderingly; "mercy! I can't tell."

"Claire, think," in a tone almost of entreaty. I want to know—I must know."

"You must know? Why, Madeline?"

"Because—because I want to find out what is in you; how strong you are."

Claire looked more and more mystified. "State your case, then," she said, quietly. "I will try and analyze myself."

"Good; now, Claire Keith, suppose that you love some man very much, and you trust him without knowing why, for no other reason than that you love him. When you are happiest, because you have but just parted from your lover——"

Claire started and coloured a little.

"When you are thinking of the time, not far away, when you shall not part from him any more—suppose that just then I, a friend whom you have loved, come to you and say: 'This hero of yours is false; he is a two-faced villain; he has deceived you; he is not honourable; he will betray you if he can.' What would you answer me?"

Claire lifted her head proudly. "I would make you take back every word you had uttered, or prove it beyond the shadow of a doubt?"

"And if I proved it?"

"Then I would thank you; and hate myself for having been deceived, and him for having deceived me."

"Would you grieve for him, Claire?"

Quick as thought came the answer:

"Grieve for him! No, I could no more love a liar and a villain than I could caress a viper! I tell you, Madeline, I understand your feelings when you say that you hate Lucian Davlin," shuddering.

"And you would not hate me also for rudely undeceiving you?"

"Hate my best friend; my benefactor? No!"

"I am thankful!"

"But, Madeline, what does all this mean? Is this what you wanted to say to

me? What can my feelings have to do with your case?"

"Claire,"—Madeline's face was very sad again—"this case is *our* case."

"*Our* case?"

"Yes, ours; Olive's, yours, mine. And now I am going to test your strength."

Claire did not look very strong just then.

"You saw Edward Percy to-day."

Claire Keith sprang to her feet. "How do you know that? And what has he to do with the case?"

"I know it because we, Mr. Percy and myself, came to this city by the same train, and I could easily surmise that his business here was with you."

"Well?" haughtily.

"Ah!" sadly; "you are almost angry with me now. But listen, Claire. Are you perfectly familiar with all the facts connected with poor Philip Girard's sad disgrace?"

"I think so," coldly.

"You know that he was convicted upon the testimony of Lucian Davlin and another?"

"Yes."

"Do you recall the name of the man who was wounded, so said the jury, by Mr. Girard?"

Up sprang Claire, her eyes blazing. "Madeline," she cried, "I see what you are coming at. You have got into your head the ridiculous idea that this man Percy and Edward Percy are the same. It is absurd!"

"Why?"

"Because—because it is!" Then, as if the matter were quite settled, "why, he must have been in Europe at the time."

"Claire, you are getting angry with me, and I have a long story to tell you. But there is an easy way to settle this matter. Are you willing to let me take the picture you have of Edward Percy, and accompany me into Olive's presence whlie I ask her if she ever saw the original?"

Nothing else could have so effectually quenched Claire's wrath. She saw that Madeline had some strong reason for her strange words. Sitting down with paling cheeks and trembling limbs, she thought. Then looking across at Madeline, she said, wearily:

"I can't understand you at all, Madeline. It never once occured to me to connect the man who brought all that trouble upon poor Philip with my Edward Percy. It does not seem possible that they could be the same. I had supposed the other Percy to be a man like—like Davlin."

"My dear, did you ever see Davlin?"

"No."

"And you have fancied him a sort of handsome horse-jockey, and this Percy one of the same brotherhood?"

"Perhaps," smiling a little.

"Claire, Lucian Davlin is an Appollo in person, a courtier in manner, and a Mephistopheles at heart. And Percy is an abridgement of Davlin."

"I can't see," said Claire, rather frostily, "even if Edward Percy is the man who was wounded by some unknown person five years ago, why he must of necessity be a villain and a deceiver. It would be very, very unpleasant, of course, to find that such were the case. But I could not hate Edward Percy for that, even if the fact must separate us."

"Claire, Edward Percy is not only the man who helped send your sister's husband to prison, but he is a villain doubly perjured; a deceiver, a betrayer. If justice ever gets her due he will end his days in the penitentiary."

Then, seeing that Claire was about to speak: "Let me finish, now you shall have your proof."

She recounted all there was to tell, from the day when Claire showed her the picture and she distrusted the face, to the present moment.

Claire Keith listened in immovable silence, not a muscle quivered. For many minutes after Madeline had finished her recital, she sat staring straight before her, like a statue. At length she arose and crossed to the door, drew back the bolt with a steady hand, put up a warning fin-

ger, and said, in a voice like frozen silver: "Wait," then disappeared.

Madeline scarcely had time to wonder what she meant, before Claire was back standing before her, calm and cold as an iceberg. She held in her hand the picture of Edward Percy, with the face turned away, and this she extended to Madeline.

"It is best that we make no mistakes," she said, quietly; "go show that to Olive. Don't tell her how it came into your possession, ask her if it is he. Then come back to me."

"Shall I tell her," began Madeline.

"Tell her nothing until you have brought me back the picture."

She pushed her towards the door.

Madeline walked down-stairs, sorely puzzled, but thinking fast. She fights these facts bravely," she muttered. Does she doubt, I wonder?"

Olive was sitting before the window, watching the movements of John the gardener, when Madeline entered the parlour. Going straight to her, she placed the picture in her hand and said:

"Do you know that face?"

Olive Girard gave a startled cry.

"Madeline, how did you come by this?"

"No matter," calmly, "do you know the picture?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"The man who sent my husband to prison, Percy.

Madeline took the picture from her hand, "Are you sure?"

"I could swear to the face after these five years."

"Thank you, Olive. Now be patient, I must go back to my room for a little while. Don't ask me any questions yet. When I come down I will tell you, how I obtained this, and why I have talked to you so much of this man,"

Madeline walked out of the room, leaving Olive staring after her in bewilderment

Claire was sitting in the same attitude as when she left her. "Well?" she said, raising her eyes.

"She recognised it immediately. She would swear that it is the man who sent her husband to prison."

"Thank you, dear."

Claire took the picture from her hands, and without once glancing at it, she bent forward and dropped it into the grate.

Madeline threw herself on her knees at the girl's side. "Oh, Claire, Claire! I have made you miserable, forgive me."

"What for? You have done me a great service. Do you think I want that man's love?"

"But Claire ——"

"I loved an ideal, that ideal, see;" pointing to the grate. "Do you think I shall cry after a pinch of ashes?" looking her full in the face. Then with a shrug of annoyance. "You have roused poor Olive's curiosity, she must hear of this miserable discovery of ours, or yours, bah," stamping her foot angrily, "my pride is hurt more than my heart!"

"Your pride need not suffer more than it does already, Claire. You have seen me humbled to the dust, see me so still, and surely it won't be so bitter to think that poor Madeline knows that your sunny life has suffered one little shadow. I will tell Olive all I know of Edward Percy, save that you have ever seen him. The knowledge that he has crossed your path can in no way benefit her, or aid us in unmasking him. Evidently, he does not know that you are in any way connected with the fortunes of Philip Girard. Let this rest between us. If this plan suits you, perhaps I had better go and tell my story to Olive. I have twice postponed a revelation to-day."

"The plan does suit me. Many, many thanks, dear Madeline," said Claire, calmly and gently. "And now, as I must, of course, be supposed to first hear this story after it has been told to Olive, or at that time, I would prefer being pre.

sent when you enlighten her. Let us dress for dinner, go down together, and—I leave the rest to your tact."

Madeline could readily comprehend that it would be easier for Claire to sit, with Olive, a listener, than to wait and hear the story from the lips of her sister. If it were left to Olive to tell, Claire's face might betray her heart, perhaps. But now, hearing it from Madeline, and with Olive, whose surprise and dismay at the revelation would quite effectually cover up any signs of emotion Claire might manifest, the thing did not appear so difficult.

Madeline signified her approval, and they separated to dress for dinner.

Claire Keith made her toilet with swift, firm fingers, and all the while she was thinking fiercely, scornfully. She was not stunned by the blow that had stricken her love and her pride. Rather, it seemed, she was quickened into unusual activity and clearness of thought.

After a time, perhaps, she would feel more the sadness, the cruelty, of the hurt; now she felt the outrage to her pride, and a fierce self-scorn that she could have ever loved a man so base. She hated Edward Percy for having deceived her, and equally she despised herself of having been thus deceived by this specious flatterer.

"You little fool!" she scoffed at her image reflected back from her mirror. "You are a very idiot among idiots! I wonder where are all your high notions now. So," giving her hair an angry jerk, "you perched yourself aloft on a pinnacle, didn't you? You looked down upon all your sisterhood who were deceived, or betrayed, or sorrowing; and you wondered how women could be so weak; how they *could* be deluded by base men. You looked upon poor dead Kitty, and wondered what was the flaw in her intellect that made her the slave of a gambler and a villain. You argued that only an unsophisticated school girl could be deceived as was poor Madeline. Oh, you have been very proud, and very high has been your standard of manly worth, Miss Claire Keith! So high that the man who had occupied it might easily slip from that pedestal to—Haman's gallows!"

At this point in her tirade, something suspiciously like a sob arose in her throat and checked her utterance. But it did not retard her activity, and in a much shorter time than she usually spent upon an evening toilet, Miss Keith stood, accoutred and defiantly calm, at Madeline's door.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DUAL RENUNCIATION.

MADELINE PAYNE had lingered over her toilet, pondering the incomprehensive manner of Claire Keith. She now stood before her mirror, brush in hand, thinking.

"Not ready yet?"

If Madeline could believe her eyes, Claire was actually smiling!

"I thought you would be waiting for me," continued Claire, composedly, pulling a big chair forward, and sitting down where she could look full in Madeline's face. "But it is just as well; there is something that I want to say, before we go down. Why don't you go on with your hair?"

Madeline's hand, brush and all, had dropped to her side, and she was silently staring at her friend. Without a word she resumed her employment, looking more at Claire than at her own reflected image.

"You guessed rightly, when you accused me of having seen Mr. Percy today," pursued Claire?"

"Accused, Claire?"

"Well, informed, then. I did see him He wrote me a letter; it was posted at Bellair; you see," smiling bitterly; "that I have no reason for doubting anything you have told me."

A new light broke over Madeline's face "Do you doubt?" she asked quickly.

"Not one word!"

"Oh!" drawing a breath of relief. "You were so composed I thought ——"

"That I was hoping to disprove your statements? Not at all. And why should I not be composed? Do you think my heart could break for such a man?"

"Hearts don't break so easily," said Madeline, gloomily, "but they ache sometimes."

"Do they?" placing her hand over her heart and smiling faintly. "Well, mine don't ache either, yet; but it burns."

Madeline stayed her brush again. "No," she murmured, "it don't ache *yet*."

Claire made a gesture of impatience. "Oh, I know what you mean, Madeline! By and by my heart will ache, of course—I know that, having discovered, quite recently, that I am human. One can't feel outraged and angry always, and something, I suppose, my day-dreams will come back and haunt me. Well, that is a part of the price we have to pay for intruding into dreamland when we are not asleep. But this is not what I began to say. Edward Percy met me to-day, and this is what he told me: He said he was going away, upon some geological expedition, and would most likely be gone a year. He wanted me to promise to hold myself free until he could return and claim me. He would exact no other promise now, only pledging himself. At the end of a year, all obstacles to our open engagement would be removed. I, of course, supposed, then, that the 'obstacles' referred to, were business and financial ones. Don't think, Madeline, that we have been in the habit of meeting clandestinely. He visited me openly in Baltimore, but not often enough to excite remark; and we frequently met at other places, as he went in the best society there."

Claire paused, but Madeline went on with her toilet in grave silence.

"Madeline, darling, I can't thank you enough for opening my eyes before it was too late, while it was no worse—and I can't explain my feelings. I despise him, and I despise myself for being thus duped. It is my pride that is suffering now but, of course, I know that, despise the man as I may, my heart will be heavier and my life darker, because of what I believed him to be. Now let us go to Olive."

Madeline Payne threw her arms impulsively about her friend and murmured, brokenly:—"Claire, Claire! you are braver than I, and far, far more worthy. You have a right to be happy, and you shall be."

And at that moment the girl renounced a resolve she had taken, and a hope she had cherished.

As they descended the stairs together Claire fancied that she looked paler, and a thought sadder than before.

They found Olive and dinner waiting As they took their places about the luxury-laden board, three lovelier women or three sadder hearts could not have been found in a day's journey.

Of the three, Claire Keith was the calmest, the most self-possessed. All that was to be related by Madeline, all that Olive was waiting in anxious expectation to hear, she knew already. The best and the worst had been revealed to her; her own course was clear before her. So she ate her dinner with composure, and bore a large share in the table talk that, but for her, would have been rather vague and spasmodic.

Dinner was an ordeal for Olive, at least, on that day, for her mind was filled with thoughts of Philip, and wonderment as to how the picture of the man who had been his ruin came into the possessfon of Madeline, who was making herself more and more of a mystery.

Madeline, too, was restless. She wished the revelation were made and done with. She wondered if she could control the future so far as Olive was concerned, for she had made her plans, and did not propose to let the work be taken out of her hands.

When Madeline had related to Olive the events that had been transpiring at Oakley, she had narrated faithfully the

scenes between Cora and Percy, but she had withheld the name of the latter, a fact which was not even noticed by Olive, who had not been especially interested in this last actor upon the scene.

Now, when dinner was over, and they had grouped themselves about the grate, its ruddy glow illuminating the twilight that was fast giving place to evening shadows, Madeline retold the story of Percy's first interview with Cora on his arrival, and his second, in the summer-house, the overhearing of which had caused that long absence from Miss Arthur's dressing-room, which necessitated her ingenious and highly improbable explanation to the aggrieved spinster, with which the reader is already acquainted.

During this recital the face of Olive Girard was a study. It changed from curiosity to wonder; from wonder to a dawning hopefulness of finding in all this a possible clue, that might help her husband to his freedom. Then despair took the place of hope, as the clue seemed to elude her grasp. At the end, astonishment and incredulity fairly took away her breath. She sank back in her chair without uttering a word.

Madeline waited for comments, but Claire was the first to speak. During the recital she had been able to think, and to some purpose. As the disjointed fragments were joined together by Madeline, Claire was drawing shrewd and close inferences. Now she lifted her head and asked:

"Madeline, have you formed any sort of a theory, as to how all this might affect Olive and Philip?"

Madeline looked up in surprise at the question and answered it by asking another: "Have you?"

"Yes, but I think Olive would rather hear yours; and mine is, as yet, but half formed."

Olive had regained a measure of her composure, and now she sat erect, and said, eagerly:

"Madeline, I have been too much surprised and shocked to think clearly. Think for me, child, and for mercy's sake, tell me at once all that you suspect."

"I suspect much," replied the girl gravely; "but what we want is *proof*. First we want to find out who is the party who accompanied Madame Cora, or Alice, as Percy called her, to Europe, for to Europe she went. Did she know Lucian Davlin ten years ago? Did they go together to Europe?"

"You want to know, first of all," said Claire, interrupting her, "when the intimacy of those two did begin. The woman may not have known him ten years ago. It would be easier to find out if they have been allies during the past five years."

Madeline turned a look of surprised admiration upon the speaker as she replied:

"You are right, Claire, and keener than I. Yet, my theory is, that they were friends before the woman fled from her cottage in the suburbs. I think the stealing of the marriage certificate has a strong savour of a man's thoughtful cunning. The woman could not have been so deep a schemer in those days. Now, Olive, let us suppose that these two were plotting in unison. Edward Percy's first wife dies, and no one the wiser about the marriage. Then he inherits his uncle's wealth. If Edward Percy were to die then, the woman, Cora, could come forward as his widow, display the proofs of their marriage, and inherit his fortune. He seems to have no living relatives, but, even should other heirs appear, she would claim her widow's portion."

"Good heavens!" gasped Olive.

"Wait," pursued Madeline; "Now, don't you see, supposing all the rest true, that if Lucian Davlin attempted the life of this man, with a view of getting his money, and if he failed in some manner unknown—don't you see that, holding over Percy's head the fear of the law, and the proofs of his having committed bigamy, he might thus silence him?" Then, that the two disliking Philip

irard, and finding the opportunity to row suspicion upon him by circumantial evidence, would naturally do so."

Olive Girard was fearfully agitated, but, ter a few moments, had in a measure ecovered her self-possession. Then the iree seemed seized with a desire to talk ll at once. And talk they did—fast, arnestly, and excitedly at times.

At last, out of many words, they evolved plan of action, and having arrived at a lefinite conclusion, they settled down into partial calm once more; a calm that was broken by a most agreeable ripple.

Dr. Clarence Vaughan, was announced, and ushered inio their presence, all in the same moment.

Dr. Vaughan was glad to see Madeline; that was evident. But while he expressed his pleasure in frank brotherly fashion, his eyes wandered from her face to that of Claire Keith.

It was only a look, but Madeline Payne would have exchanged all the smiles, hand clasps, and brotherly words she could ever hope to receive from him, from one such glance from his eyes. But the tender wistfulness was all for Claire—blind Claire, who saw nothing of it.

Madeline withdrew her hand from his clasp, uttering as she did so, a flippant commonplace in response to his hearty greeting, but Claire had caught the look in his eyes, and the false gaiety in Madeline's voice, and it caused her to wonder.

Heretofore she had lived in a dream of her own, and had been careless of the varying expressions of those about her. Her dream had been dispelled, and she seemed now to have a keener eye for the emotion of others. Troubles of our own, sometimes, open our eyes to the fact that our friends are not all supremely happy. Then we naturally fall to speculating as to the cause. This was the case with Claire. She speculated a little as to why the eyes of Dr. Vaughan rested upon her, with that half-sad expression in them. Then she wondered why the spirit of perversity had possessed Madeline, and induced her to extend to Dr. Vaughan so shabby a welcome. Then, without realizing it, she fell to observing the manner of these two more closely.

"Well, Miss Payne, what report do you bring from the enemy's country?" he asked, after a few commonplaces between himself and the mistress of the house.

"I have not been in the enemy's country, Doctor Vaughan; the enemies are infesting mine."

"As you please, little warrior," smiled he. "Then may I ask, how goes the battle?"

"Oh yes! you may ask," crossing over and seating herself beside Olive, "but your curiosity must wait. It's a ridiculous, tiresome story, and wouldn't amuse you much, or interest you, either. I am going to let Mrs. Girard inflict it upon you, when she thinks you need a penance."

"I think *you* need a penance now, Miss Payne, for accusing me of too much curiosity, and too little interest."

"Oh, I didn't mean that, exactly," shrugging her shoulders carelessly. "I suppose, of course, a physician is interested to a certain extent in all his subjects, living or dead; but I can't let you dissect my mind to-night. Besides," laughing maliciously, "I know you would recommend leeches and blisters, and maybe a straight jacket, and I can't be stopped in my charming career just yet."

Clarence Vaughan seemed not in the least offended by the girl's cool insolence. He smiled indulgently, and when Olive ventured a gentle remonstrance, he murmured to Claire, with a half laugh: "Miss Madeline is incomprehensible to me; do you understand her, Miss Keith?"

And Claire, looking across at her friend, replied, oddly: "I love her, Doctor Vaughan, and I begin to understand her, I think."

"Do you?" smiling down upon her. "Then some day will you not interpret her to me?"

Claire's answer was again given oddly, as, lifting her eyes to his face, she said,

quite gravely: "If it is necessary to do so, perhaps I will."

Then conversation became general; rather Dr. Vaughan talked, and they all listened.

Claire found herself thinking that Dr. Vaughan was a noble-looking man; not alluringly handsome, as was Edward Percy; not possessing the magnetic fascination that Madeline had described as belonging to Lucian Davlin. But he had a fine face, nay, a grand face, full of strength and sweetness, not devoid of beauty, but having in it something infinitely better, truer, and more godlike than mere physical beauty can impart to any face.

Then she thought of Madeline, of her loneliness, her sorrow, and her need of just such a strong, gentle nature to lean upon, to look up to, and to obey. "She would obey *him*," quoth Claire to herself.

Next she fell to watching Madeline, through half-closed eyelashes. She saw how the girl listened to his every word; how, when his eyes were not upon her, she seemed to devour him with a hungry, longing, sorrowful gaze.

"As if she were taking leave of him forever," thought Claire.

And that is what Madeline was doing. When she came to the city, it was with the determination to win the love of this man, if it could be won; to let nothing stand between herself and the fulfilment of that purpose. But all this had been changed, and seeing how bravely Claire bore the shock of her lover's baseness; how proudly, how nobly, she commanded herself, Madeline had abandoned her purpose.

"I am not worthy of him, and she is," she told herself.

When she declared that Claire should be happy, she bade farewell to her own hope of future happiness. She would help him to win the girl he loved, and then she would be content to die; aye, more than content.

To-night, therefore, she was saying in her heart a farewell to this man, who was so dear to her. She had almost hoped that she should not meet him again for t present, and yet she was so glad to hav seen him once more. She was glad of h presence, yet fearful lest her good resolu tion might be shaken. She would not le him be too kind to her, rather let hin think her ungrateful, anything—what coul it matter now?

"Shall you not come back to the city soon, Miss Payne? Surely your old home cannot be the most charming place, in your eyes," questioned Clarence, after a time.

"I don't intend returning to the city—at least, not for some time, Doctor Vaughan."

Clarence looked perplexed.

To break the silence that ensued, Claire crossed to the piano and began playing soft, dreamy fragments of melody.

Presently Olive took up the conversation, and when Madeline again turned her face toward him, he was listening to Olive and looking at Claire. It was the same look, yearning, tender.

Claire, all unconscious of his gaze, was looking at Madeline, as she played softly on.

As Olive and Clarence talked Claire saw the face of the girl grow dark; she saw her eyes full of a hungry, despairing light, and gradually there crept upon her the remembrance that she had seen that same look, only not so woful, in the eye of Clarence Vaughan; that same look fixed upon herself. Involuntarily her fingers slipped from the keys, and she turned from the instrument to encounter the same gaze fastened upon her now; ardent, tender, longing eyes they were, and her own fell before them.

Claire Keith was troubled. She wanted to be alone, to think. She murmured an excuse; her head ached; she would retire.

Clarence had noted an unusual brightness in her eye, and a feverish flush upon her cheek. Now, however, she was quite pale, and as she extended her hand to him with a strange, new sensation of diffidence and consciousness, he clasped it for a moment in his own, and said, earnestly: "You do not look at all well, Miss Keith; you are sure it is only a headache?"

"Quite sure," smiling faintly.

"Then good-night. I shall enquire after your head to-morrow."

"Thank you," she murmured.

Then nodding to her sister and Madeline, she glided from the room.

It had *all* come upon her at once. Edward Percy was an impostor; Edward Percy, as she had believed in him, had never existed. The love that she had believed hers was hers no longer, or, if it were, she no longer desired it. Almost simultaneously with this knowledge, came the unspoken assurance that she was the possessor of a worthier love, a manlier heart.

She could not feel glad to know this, yet she was not sorry. Somehow it soothed her to know that she was not a forsaken, loveless maiden. It was something to possess the love of so good a man, even if she could make it no return.

But Madeline. Poor Madeline, she loved this man; she needed his love, she must have it.

Claire pulled back the curtains from her window, and gazed out into the starlit night. "She needs this love," the girl murmured. "Clarence Vaughan shall learn to love her, if I can bring it about. Yes, "*even if I loved him*, I would give him up to her.

CHAPTER XX.

STRUGGLING AGAINST FATE.

When Claire left the drawing-room, Madeline had started up as if about to follow her. Recalling herself, she sat down again, keeping as before, near to Olive, and taking as little share in the conversation as possible. She dared not trust herself too much, her good resolves were strong, but not stronger than was the charm of his voice and presence.

"Let them think me uncivil," she murmured to herself, "what does it matter now?"

But her trial was not over. Olive and Clarence had held frequent council concerning the wayward girl, and how they could best influence her aright without breaking the letter or spirit of their promise to her. And the absence of Claire added to their freedom of speech.

Olive had intimated to Doctor Vaughan that Madeline had taken some, perhaps unsafe, steps in the pursuit of her enemies. He, understanding the impetuosity of the girl, as well as her reckless fearlessness, could not conceal the anxiety he felt.

Acting under an impulse of disinterested kindness, Clarence Vaughan crossed the room and sat down by Madeline's side.

"Miss Madeline," he said, as respectfully as if to an empress, "we, Mrs. Girard and myself, cannot get rid of the idea that somehow you partly belong to us, that we ought to be given a little, just a very little, authority over you."

There was a shade of bitterness in the girl's answer. "You have the *right* to exercise authority over me, if you choose to do so. You are my benefactors."

They felt the reproof of her words. This keen-witted, uncontrollable girl, was putting up barrier upon barrier between herself and their desire to serve her. Very quietly he answered her:

"You do us an injustice, when you suggest that we claim your confidence on the score of an indebtedness on your part. It has been our happiness to serve you. If we have not your esteem, if we may not stand toward you in the light of a brother and sister, anxious only for your welfare and happiness, then we have no claim upon you."

"My happiness!"

The face was averted, but the lips were pale and drawn, and the words came through them like a moan.

Olive stirred uneasily. She could see that the girl was suffering, although she did not guess at the cause.

"Yes," continued Clarence, laying his hand gently upon hers, "Madeline—will you let me call you Madeline? Will you let me be your brother? I have no sister,

almost no kin; I won't be an exacting brother," smilingly. "I won't overstep the limits you set me, but we must have done with this nonsense about benefactors, and gratitude, and all that."

No answer, eyes down dropped, face still half averted, and looking as if hardening into marble.

"What is my fate?" still holding her hand. "Can you accept so unworthy a brother?"

"Yes," in such a cold, far-away tone.

He lifted the hand to his lips, "Thank-you, Madeline," he said, as if she had done him high honour.

Madeline felt her courage failing her. How could she listen to him, talk to him, with anything like sisterly freedom, and not prove false to her resolve to further his cause with Claire? And yet how could she refuse him the trust he asked of her?

It was very pleasant to know that he was thus interested in her, she felt herself slipping quickly into a day-dream in which nothing was distinct save that there existed a bond between them, that he had claimed the right to exercise authority over her, and that she was very, very glad even to be his slave. Listening to his voice, a smile crept to her lips, and ——"

"The eyes smiled too,
But t'was as if remembering they had wept,
And knowing they would some day weep again."

"I don't intend to give up my claims upon Madeline, I elected her my sister, when I brought her home with me. And I had been flattering myself that I was to have a companion, but I am afraid she will run away from me. She ought to take Claire's place in my home, ought she not? Claire is with me so little," said Olive.

Madeline smiled sadly. "I could never do that," she said, "I could no more fill Claire's place than I could substitute myself for the rays of the sun."

"Claire would laugh at you for that speech," said Olive.

"But it is true, is it not?" appealing Doctor Vaughan.

He coloured slightly under her ga "We don't want two Claires," he sai "but you can be yourself, and that w make us happy."

The girl let her eyes fall, and rest up her clasped hands.

"I would like to make you happy," sh said, softly.

"Really?"

"Really," lifting her eyes to his face

"Then, promise us that you will let help to right your wrongs, and that yo will come back, like a good sister, an stay with Mrs Girard."

Her face hardened. "I cannot," sh said, briefly.

"You will not," seriously.

No answer.

"Madeline, what is it you wish to do?"

"What I wish to do, I cannot. I can tell you what I intend to do," sitting very erect.

"Then what do you intend?"

"I intend," turning her eyes away from them both, and fixing them moodily upon the fire, "to follow up the path in which I have set my feet. I intend to oust a base adventuress from the home that was my mother's, to wrest the fortune that is mine from the grasp of a bad old man, and make him suffer for the wrong he did my mother. I intend to laugh at Lucian Davlin, when he is safe behind prison bars, to hunt down and frustrate an impostor, and by so doing, clear the name of Philip Girard before all the world." Her voice was low but very firm, dogged almost in its tone. He turned a perplexed face toward Olive.

"What does it all mean?" he asked.

"What she says," replied Mrs. Girard, flushing with suppressed excitement. "She has found a clue that may lead to Philip's release."

He moved nearer to the girl, and taking her hand, drew her toward him, until she faced him. "Madeline, is this true?"

"Yes."

"And you will hold me to a promise not

) lift a hand to help clear the name of my iend?" reproachfully.

"Yes," unflinchingly.

"Are you doing right, my sister?"

She attempted to draw away her hand.

"Child, what can you do?"

She turned her eyes toward Olive. She will tell you what I have done. I an do much more."

Olive came suddenly to her side. "Oh, Madeline!" she said, "let him take all his into his hands. It is not fit work for you. It will harden you, make you bitter, and——"

Madeline wrested her hand away and sprang up, standing before them flushed and goaded into bitterness.

"Yes," she cried, wildly, "I know; you need not say it. It will harden me; it has already. It will make me bitter and bad, unfit for your society, unworthy of your friendship. I shall be a liar, a spy, a hypocrite—but I shall succeed. You see, you were wrong in offering me your friendship, Doctor Vaughan. I shall not be worthy to be called your sister, but," brokenly, "you need not have feared. I never intended to presume upon your friendship; I never intended to trouble you after—after my work is done. Ah! how dared I think to become one of you—I, whom you rescued from a gambler's den; I who go about disguised, and play the servant to people whom you would not touch. You are right; after this I will go my way alone."

Her voice became inarticulate, the last word was a sob, and she turned swiftly to leave the room.

Olive sprang forward with a remorseful cry, but Clarence Vaughan motioned her back, and with a quick stride was at the door, one hand upon it, the other firmly clasping the wrist of the now sobbing girl. Closing the door, which she had partially opened, he led her back, very gently, but firmly, and placing her in a chair, stood beside her until the sobs ceased. Then he drew a chair close to her own, and said, softly:

"My little sister, we never meant this. These are your own morbid fancies. Because you are playing the part of amateur detective, you are not necessarily cut off from all your friends. We would not give you up so easily, and there is too much that is good and noble in you to render your position so very dangerous to your womanhood. You have grieved Mrs. Girard deeply by imputing any such meaning to her words. Can't you understand, child, that it is because we care for you, because we want to shield you from the hardships you must of necessity undergo, that we wish you to let us work with and for you?"

Madeline shivered and gave a long, sobbing sigh. He took both listless hands in his own.

"Now, sister mine, won't you make me a promise, just one?"

Her hands trembled under his. How could she resist him when his strong, firm clasp was upon her; when he was looking into her eyes pleadingly, even tenderly; when his breath was on her cheek, and his voice murmured in her ear? She sat before him, contrite, conquered, strangely happy; conscious of nothing save a wish that she might die then and there, with her hands in his. She was afraid to speak and break the spell. He had said that he cared for her, was not that enough?

"Tell me, Madeline."

"Yes," she breathed, rather than uttered.

"Thank you. Now, sister, we are going to trust to your sagacity in this matter. But you must promise me, as your brother, who is bound to look after your welfare, that you will take no decisive steps without first informing us, and that as soon as the work becomes too heavy for your hands, you will call upon me to help you. My sister will surely do nothing that her brother cannot sanction?"

She dropped her eyes and said, simply: "I will do what you wish me to."

"You will give me your confidence, then?"

"Yes."

"Am I to hear a complete history of all that has happened thus far from Mrs. Girard?"

"Yes."

"And, after hearing it, may I communicate with you?"

She glanced up in surprise.

"Or," continued he; "better still, may I come down to Bellair and talk things over with you, should I deem it advisable?"

"If you wish;" looking glad.

"Mind, I don't want to intrude; I will not come if you don't desire it; but I shall wish to come. And you may manage our interviews as you see fit. I will do nothing to compromise you in the eyes of the people you are among. May I come?"

"Yes;" very softly, and trembling under his hand.

"Then we will say no more about all this to-night. You have already abused your strength, and if you don't get rest and sleep we shall have you ill again, and then what would become of our little detective?"

Olive came forward with outstretched hands and pleading eyes. "I can't wait any longer to be forgiven for my thoughtless words," she said. "Madeline, you will forgive me?"

"Of course Madeline will," replied Clarence. "Now you had better forgive Madeline for putting such a perverse construction upon your words, and then we will send her away to get the rest she must have."

"I was abominable, Olive," said the girl, so ruefully that Clarence laughed outright. "Of course. I know you are too kind to say a cruel thing. I—I believe I was trying to quarrel with you all; do forgive me."

"Of course you were trying to quarrel with us; and I haven't a bit of faith in your penitence now, young lady," said Clarence, rising and smiling. 'I can't believe in you until I am assured that you will go to bed straightway, and swallow every drop of the wine I shall send up to you.'

"With something nice in it," suggested Olive.

"With something very nice in it, of course. Now, will you obey so tyrannical a brother, and swallow his first brotherly prescription without making a face?"

All his kindness and care for her comfort brought a thrill of gladness to the girl's heart, and some of the old *débonnaire*, half defiant light back to her eyes, as she replied, while rising from her chair, in obedience to a gesture of playful authority from Clarence, "Will I accept a scolding and go to bed, that means."

Then making a wry face and evidently referring to the wine: "Is it very bitter?"

"Not very; but you must swallow every drop."

"And I will order the wine," said Olive, touching the bell. "You know, Dr. Vaughan, that Madeline leaves us in the morning?"

"No?" in surprise. "Must you go so soon?"

"Yes," demurely, "unless I am forbidden."

"We are too wise to forbid you to do anything you have set your heart on. Then I must tell you good-bye here and now, for a little time."

"Or a long one," gravely.

"Not for a long one. 'If the mountain won't come,' you know—well, if I don't get *very* satisfactory reports from you, look out for me."

"You can't get at me," wickedly.

"Can't I? Wait and see. I'll come as your grandfather, or your maiden aunt."

"Please don't," laughing, "one spinster is enough."

"Well, I won't, then; I think I'll come as your father confessor."

At this Olive joined in the laugh.

"Good-night, Dr. Vaughan."

"Good-night, Miss Payne," with exaggerated emphasis and dignity, but holding fast to her hand.

She looked at the hand doubtfully, then up into his face. "Good-night—brother," with pretty shyness.

"That is better," releasing the little hand. "Good-night, sister mine. Mind you drink every drop of the wine."

"I will!" quite seriously. "Good-night, Olive."

Olive stooped and kissed her cheek. "Good-night, dear," she said, "and happy dreams."

Dr. Vaughan opened the door for her, and smiled after her as she looked back from the foot of the stairs. Then closing the door he came back, and stood on the hearth-rug, looking thoughtful.

"It is a difficult nature to deal with, and in her present mood, a dangerous one. She is painfully sensitive, and possesses an exceedingly nervous temperament. Then, that episode with Davlin was very humiliating to her, and it is constantly in her mind. Evidently she has lately been under much excitement, and she is hardly herself to-night. I think, however, if I were you, I would make no further effort to dissuade her from her purpose. It will do no good, and harm might come of it."

"Indeed, I will not," said Olive. "How thankful I am that you were here; your calmness and tact has saved us something not pleasant. I don't think I could have managed her myself."

"Probably not; and now I will prepare a soothing and sleeping draught, and then, as it is late, will detain you no longer. Perhaps you had better see that the draught is administered."

Olive gladly accepted the charge, and shortly after Doctor Vaughan took his departure, wise and yet blind; blind as to the true cause of Madeline's outbreak and subsequent submissiveness.

Madeline obeyed to the letter the instructions of Doctor Vaughan. As a result, she fell asleep almost immediately, before calm thought had come to dispel her mood of dreamy happiness.

In the morning she awoke quieted, refreshed, and quite mistress of herself. She did not once refer to the events of the previous evening. Only, before taking leave of Claire she whispered in her ear:

"Dear Claire, you can make a noble man happy. Let his love atone to you for this present bitterness. God bless you both."

It was an odd speech, truly. But as Madeline turned her back upon the pretty villa, and was driven swiftly to the railroad depot, she wondered why Claire had responded to it only with a passionate kiss and with tears in her beautiful eyes.

And Claire, having seen her driven from the door, fled precipitately to her room. Locking herself in, she fell upon her knees beside a low chair. Burying her face in her hands she wept bitterly—not for herself, but for the girl who was so heroically resigning to another the man she loved; who was going forth, alone, to encounter hardship, perhaps danger, to fight single-handed, not only her own battles, but those of her friends as well.

"And I dared to judge her," said the girl, indignantly. "I presumed to criticise the delicacy of this grand, brave nature! Why, I ought to be proud to claim her friendship, and I am!"

From that hour, let Madeline's course seem ever so doubtful, let Olive fear and doubt as she would, Claire Keith stoutly defended every act, and averred that Madeline could do nothing wrong. And from that hour, Claire began to plot upon her own responsibility.

In due course Doctor Vaughan called, and was closeted with Olive a very long time—rather, with Olive and Claire, for this young lady had surprised her sister, by expressing a desire to hear what Dr. Vaughan would say of Madeline's adventures. To tell the truth, Claire had fancied that Clarence would criticise more or less, and it was in the capacity of champion for the absent that she appeared at the interview.

After the matter had been fully discussed, Doctor Vaughan addressed himself to Claire: "Miss Keith, you have been a good listener. Won't you give us your opinion as to the achievements of our little friend?"

Claire came forward, with a charming mixture of frankness and embarrassment: "First, let me make the *amende honourable*, Doctor Vaughan. I presented myself at this interview with the full intention, and for the express purpose, of waging war upon you both, if necessary, and I had no doubt that it would be."

Doctor Vaughan looked much astonished.

"But," pursued Claire, "I have misjudged you. I did not think you would so heartily approve of Madeline's course, and I was bristling with bayonets to defend her."

"I must own to being of Claire's opinion," interposed Olive, looking somewhat amused.

Clarence smiled and then looked thoughtful.

"I can easily understand," he said, seriously, "how you ladies might have looked upon the course Miss Payne has taken, as an objectionable, even an improper, one. The position in which she has placed herself is, certainly, an unusual, a startling one for a woman of refinement and delicacy. But we must consider that the occasion is also an unusual one, and ordinary measures will not apply successfully to extraordinary cases. As to the impropriety, no one need fear to trust his or her honour in the keeping of a woman as brave and noble as Madeline Payne is proving herself."

"Then you do not censure Madeline for refusing to trust the matter in the hands of a detective?" questioned Olive.

"The matter *is* in the hands of a detective, Mrs. Girard; in the hands of the shrewdest and ablest little detective that could, by any possibility, have been found. Why, Madeline has accomplished, in a short time, what the best detectives on our regular force might have laboured at for a year, and then failed of achieving!"

Claire threw a look of triumph at her sister. "Oh, how glad I am to hear you say all this, and how glad Madeline would be." Then she checked herself suddenly.

"I can suggest but one improvement upon the present state of things," said Clarence, after a moment's reflection. "That is, if we can persuade Madeline to permit it, and I think we can, we should set two men at work, neither one to be aware of the employment of the other. One to trace out as much of the past of this man Percy, as may be. The other to perform the same office for Davlin. Of course, they would not be advised of the actual reason for these researches, and so their investigations would in no way interfere with Madeline's pursuit of the game at Oakley. I don't think we could improve upon the present arrangement there."

"And how do you propose to bring this about?" questioned Olive.

"By going down to Bellair, as soon as I can get the necessary permission from our little *generalissimo*, and talking the matter over with her. I think she will see the propriety of the move, don't you?" appealing to Claire.

"I think she will follow your advice," gravely.

"I hope she will," said Olive.

"I *know* she will do exactly right," asserted Claire, so positively that they both smiled.

"I think I may venture to agree with you, Miss Keith," said Dr. Vaughan.

"You had better, both of you, where Madeline is concerned," looking ferocious.

"I begin to think that valour is infectious," laughed Olive, and Clarence joined in the laugh.

Altogether the result of their council was pleasing to each of the three. Olive was hopeful; Clarence was full of enthusiasm, and more deeply in love than ever with generous Claire; and she was pleased with the frank admiration of Madeline's courage, and full of hope for Madeline's future.

"He admires her now. He will love her by and by," she assured herself.

CHAPTER XXI.

HAGAR AND CORA.

MEANWHILE, Lucian Davlin had hastened to Bellair in response to Cora's summons, full of conjectures as to what had "turned up."

When the noon train from the city puffed up to the little platform, Lucian Davlin was among the arrivals, and at the end of the depot platform stood the dainty phæton of Mrs. John Arthur. That lady herself reined in her prancing ponies, and the whole formed an object of admiration for the few depot loungers.

As Lucian Davlin crossed the platform and took his seat beside the lady, an old woman hobbled across the track. Casting a furtive glance in the direction the ponies were taking, she hobbled away toward the wood.

Miss Arthur's maid had surmised aright. It was no part of Cora's plan to permit the inmates of Oakley a view of Mr. Davlin on this occasion. So the ponies were driven briskly away from the town, and when that was left behind, permitted to walk through the almost leafless woods, while Cora revealed to Lucian the extent of the fresh calamity that had befallen them in the advent of Mr. Percy.

"Well, what have you to say to all this?" demanded the lady, pettishly, after she had disburdened herself of the story, with its most minute particulars. "This is a pretty state of affairs, is it not? I am worn out. I wish Oakley and the whole tribe were at the bottom of the sea!"

"Stuff!" with much coolness; then taking a flask containing some amber liquid from a breast pocket he held it between his eyes and the light for critical examination.

"Stuff? where? In that flask?"

"No, in your words. This," shaking the amber liquid, "is simon pure; best French. Have some? I felt as if I needed a 'bracer' this morning."

"Up all night, I presume," eyeing him askant.

"Pretty much;" indifferently. "Won't take any? Then here's confusion to Percy," and he took a long draught. "Now, then," pocketing the brandy and turning toward her, briskly, "I'm ready for business. How the deuce did we let this fellow pounce down upon us like this? I thought he was safe in Cuba?"

"He will never be safe anywhere, until he gets to ——"

"Heaven," suggested he.

"I suppose it was stupid," she went on, gloomily. "But when Ellen Arthur raved of her dear friend Mr. Percy, how was I to imagine that among all the Percys on earth, this especial and particular one should be *the* Percy. I wrote you that she had a lover of that name; did it occur to you that it might be he?" maliciously.

"Well, candidly, it did not."

"We were a pair of stupid fools, and we are finely caught for our pains."

"First statement correct," composedly; "don't agree with the last, however."

"Why not?"

"Does he know I am on deck?"

"No."

"Didn't inquire after me, or say anything about the documents?"

"No special inquiries."

"Well, then, where is the great danger?"

"Where?" much astonished.

"Yes, where? If you told me all the truth concerning yourself ten years ago, we can make him play into our hands."

"How?"

"Don't go too fast. When you told me that he believed you to have left home because of an unkind step-mother, was that true?"

"It was true. I did leave home and come to the city when I was but sixteen, because my father was a drunkard, and my step-mother abusive, and we were poor and I was proud."

"Don't doubt that fact;" with an outward gesture of the supple hand. "But you told him that you had two big step-brothers!"

Cora laughed. "A big brother is an ex-

cellent weapon to hold over the heads of some men," she suggested.

"True," with an amused look. "Why didn't you brandish one over me?"

"Over you?" laughing again. "You and Percy were two different men."

"Much obliged," lifting his hat with mock gravity. "Well, we are 'two different men,' still; just let your pretty little head rest, and leave Percy to me."

"I wish to Heaven you had made an end ——"

"'Ah-h-h. I have sighed to rest me," warbled Davlin. "Cora, my love, never put your foot on too dangerous ground."

"Well, I do wish so, all the same," said she, with femine pertinacity.

"Now tell me what your plan is. We want to understand each other, and have no more bungling."

"All you will have to do will be to keep quiet and follow my cue. When I come down, we must manage it that I meet Percy in Miss Arthur's absence. The rest is easy; this Mr. Percy will not find his path free from obstacles, I think."

"What game will you play?"

"Precisely what I am playing now. I am your brother. That will explain some hings that puzzled him some time ago,' dryly. "I am your sole protector, saving the old chap, don't you see."

The woman pondered a moment. "I think it will answer," she said, at last. "At any rate, it is the best we can do now."

A little more conversation, and Cora was quite satisfied with that and other arrangements. Then the ponies were headed toward the village, and driven at a brisk pace, thus enabling Mr. Davlin to catch the afternoon train back to the city. No one at Oakley was any the wiser for his visit. It was no uncommon thing for Cora to drive out unattended, and she returned to the manor in a very good humour, considering the situation.

Cora's drive had given her an appetite, and she had partaken of no luncheon. She therefore ordered a very bounteous one to be served in the red parlour. Mr. Arthur was enjoying his usual afternoon siesta Miss Arthur was invisible, for which Cora felt duly thankful; and so she settled herself down to solitude, cold chicken and other edibles, and her own thoughts.

Ever and anon she gazed listlessly from the window, letting her eyes rove from the terrace to the hedgerow walk, the woods beyond, and back again to the terrace. Suddenly she bent forward, and looked earnestly at some object, moving toward the stile from the grove beyond. A moment later, it appeared in the gap of the hedge.

Cora leaned back in her chair, still observant, muttering:

"I thought so! It is that ugly old woman. Now, what in the world does she want here? for—yes, she is entering the grounds, coming up the terrace."

True enough, old Hagar was coming slowly along the terrace, taking a leisurely survey of the window facing that walk, as she did so. Casting her eyes upward, they met the gaze of Mrs. Arthur. Then, much to the surprise of that lady, she paused and executed a brief pantomime, as grotesque as it was mysterious.

Cora drew back in some astonishment, pondering as to whether or no the old woman might not be partially insane, when Susan, the maid of the romantic mind, appeared before her, and announced that the object of her thoughts was in the kitchen, and begged that Mrs. Arthur would permit her an interview.

Cora was still more surprised. "What can she possibly want with me?" she asked herself, quite audibly.

"If you please, ma'am," volunteered Susan, "she said that it was something important; and that she never would have put her foot inside this house, begging your pardon, only for you."

Flattering though this statement might be, it did not enlighten her much. So after a moment's reflection, Mrs. Arthur bade the girl, "show the old person up.

Accordingly, in another moment almost

old Hagar was bowing very humbly before the lady with the silken flounces. Susan retired reluctantly, deeply regretting that she could find no time to stop up the key-hole with her ear, thus rendering it impossible for prying eyes to peep through that orifice.

"Well, old woman," began Cora, rather inelegantly, it must be confessed, "what on earth were you making such a fuss about, down on the terrace? And what do you want with me?"

A close observer of the human countenance divine would never have judged, from the small amount of expression that was manifest in the face of Hagar, that her reply would have been such a very humble one. "I want to serve you, dear lady."

"The "dear lady" pursed up her lips in surprise. "You—want ——"

"To warn you, madame."

Cora was dumb with astonishment, not unmingled with apprehension. What had broken loose now?

"I am only a poor old woman, lady, and nobody thinks that Hagar has a heart for the wrongs of others. I said that I would never cross John Arthur's threshold again; but I have seen your pretty face, going to and fro through the village streets, and I knew there was no one to warn you but me."

"Oh, you did," remarked Cora, not knowing whether to be alarmed or amused, at the old woman's earnestness. "Well, old—what's your name?"

"Hagar, lady."

"Well, old Hagar, do you mean to tell me that I am in any particular danger just at present?"

"Is the dove in danger when it is in the nest of the hawk?" said Hagar, closing her eyes tight as she uttered the words, but looking otherwise very tragical.

Cora laughed musically. "Good gracious, old lady!" She was modifying her titles somewhat, probably under the influence of Hagar's flatteries. "You mean to compare me to a dove," laughing afresh, "in—a hawk's nest? Oh, dear! oh, dear!" wiping her eyes. "Now, then, please introduce me to the wicked hawk."

Hagar was getting tired of her part, and she made a direct rush at the point of the business, and with very good dramatic effect. "I mean your husband," she said, vehemently. "I mean John Arthur. He is a bad man. If he has not done it already, he will make you miserable by-and-by."

Cora drew herself up and tried to look severe. "Old lady," she said, with supernatural gravity, "don't you know that it is very improper for you to come and talk to me, like this, about my husband?"

"Just hear her!" sniffed Hagar, rather unnecessarily; "all because I think she is too young and too pretty, to be sacrificed like the others ——"

"Like the others? What others?"

"Like his first wife. She was young, like you, and a lovely lady. His cruelty was her death. And then he must worry and abuse her poor daughter, until she runs away and comes to an untimely end. And now ——"

"Now, you fear he will make an end of me?" briskly. "Sit down, old lady," becoming still more affable. "So Mr. Arthur ill-used his first wife, my predecessor?"

"Thank you, dear lady; you are very kind to a poor old woman," seating herself gingerly on the edge of a chair opposite Cora. "Yes, indeed, he did ill-use her. She was my mistress, and I shall always hate him for it."

Cora mused. Here was an old servant who hated the master of Oakley; might she not prove useful, after a time? At any rate, it would be well to sound her.

"You were very much attached to the lady, no doubt?" insinuatingly.

"Yes; and who would not be? She was very sweet and good, was my poor mistress. Oh, he is a bad, bad man, madame, and you surely cannot be very happy with him."

"And he was unkind to his step-daughter too?" ignoring the last supposition.

"Unkind? He was a wretch. Oh, I could almost murder him for his cruelty to that poor dead lassie!" fiercely.

"Perhaps he was none too kind to you," suggested Cora.

"Oh, he never treated me like a human being. He hated me because I tried to stand between her and harm. But he could not get rid of the sight of me. I have a little home where he can't avoid seeing me sometimes. I believe, if I kept always appearing before him, he would go raving mad, he hates me to that extent."

"Um-m! Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed. Why, lady, if I were without house or home, and you, out of the kindness of your heart, were to take me into your employment as the very humblest of your servants, I believe he would kill us both."

"You think he would?"

Cora actually seemed to encourage the old woman in her garrulity.

"Oh, I know it. It's not much in the way of charity, or kindness, you will be able to do in *this* house. If he don't imprison you in one of these old closed up musty rooms, you will be lucky. He his very dangerous. Sometimes I used to think he must be insane."

Cora started. "Well, Hagar," she said, sweetly, "it's very good of you to take so much interest in me. He *is* very cross sometimes, but, perhaps, it won't be so bad as you fear."

"I hope it won't," rising to go and shaking her head dubiously; "but I am afraid for you."

"Well," laughing, "I'll try and not let him lock me up, at any rate. Now, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Oh, no, lady. You looked so pretty, and so good, that I wanted to warn you; that is all. I should be glad if I could serve you, too, but I could never serve him. I don't want for anything, dear lady. Now the old woman will go."

"I won't forget you, Hagar, if I ever need a friend."

Hagar turned toward her. "If you ever want to make him feel what it is to make others suffer, Hagar will help you."

There was a vindictive light in the old woman's eyes, and she hobbled out of the room, looking as if she meant all she had said.

Cora, sat for a time, pondering over the interview, and trying to trace out some motive for insincerity on the old woman's part. But she could see none. She resolved to investigate a little, and all that evening was the most attentive and agreeable of wives. Abundant and versatile was her conversation. Deftly she led the talk up to the proper point, and then said, carelessly:

"Driving through the village, to-day, I passed that queer old woman—Hagar, do they call her? She glared at me, oh! so so savagely."

"She is an old hag!" Mr. Arthur answered, with unnecessary fierceness. "I don't see what Satan has been about, all these years, that he's not taken her away to her proper atmosphere."

"Why," in pretty surprise, "I thought she used to be one of your servants?"

"She was a servant to my first wife," moodily. "I got rid of the baggage quick enough, when Mrs. Arthur died. She is an old viper, and put more disobedience into that girl Madeline's head, than I ever could get out."

"What a horrid old wretch she must be!" shuddering.

Then the conversation dropped, and Cora was satisfied.

"The old woman shall be my tool," she thought, triumphantly.

CHAPTER XXII.

TO BE, TO DO, TO SUFFER.

On the day that followed the events last related, Madeline Payne returned to Oakley to resume her self-imposed task.

Leaving the train, the girl took the path through the woods. When she had

raversed it half way, she came upon old Hagar, who was seated upon a fallen log awaiting her. Looking cautiously about, to assure herself that the interview would have no spectators, Madeline, or Céline, as we must now call her, seated herself to listen to the report of Davlin's visit, and the success of Hagar's interview with Cora.

Expressing herself fully satisfied with what she heard, Céline made the old woman acquainted with the result of her visit to the city, or as much of it as was necessary and expedient. Then, after some words of mutual council, and a promise to visit her that evening, if possible, the girl lost no time in making her way to the manor, and straight into the presence of her mistress.

Considering that her maid was—her maid, Miss Arthur welcomed her with an almost rapturous outburst. Céline had held high place in the affections of Miss Arthur, truth to tell, since her astonishing discovery of Mr. Edward Percy, in the character of young Romeo, promenading within sight of his lady's window.

"Céline," simpered Miss Arthur, while the damsel addressed was brushing out her mistress's hair, preparatory to building it into a French wonder; "Céline, I may be wrong in talking so freely to you about myself and my—my friends, but I observe that you never presume in the least ——"

"Oh, mademoiselle, I could never do that!" cooed the girl, with wicked double meaning.

"And," pursued Miss Arthur, graciously, "you are really quite a sagacious and discreet young person."

"Thanks, miladi." Then, as if recollecting herself, "Pardon, *mademoiselle*, but you are so like her ladyship, *Madame La Baronne De Orun*, my very first mistress ——"

"Oh, I don't mind it at all, Céline. As I was saying, you seem quite a superior young person, and no doubt I am not the first who has made you a sort of *confidante*.

"Merci!" no; my lady. *Madame La Baronne* used to trust me with *everything*, and often deigned to ask my advice. But French ladies, oui, mademoiselle, always put confidence in their maids. And a maid will die rather than betray a good mistress ——"

"Exactly, Céline—are you going to put my hair so high?"

"Very high, *miladi*."

"Oh, well; will it be becoming?"

"*Oui; La mode la Francaise*," relapsing into ecstacy and French. "*Le coiffeur comme il faut! Chere amie, le-chef-d'œuvre!*"

Miss Arthur collapsed, and Céline continued to build up an atrociously unbecoming pile of puffs and curls in triumphant silence.

Céline never indulged in her native tongue, so she assured her mistress, except when carried away by momentary enthusiasm, or unwonted emotion. It was bad taste, she averred, and she desired to cultivate the beautiful American language.

Presently Miss Arthur made another venture, feeling quite justified in following in the footsteps of so august a personage as *Madame La Baronne*.

"Did you see Mr. Percy after you left Bellair?"

"No, mademoiselle."

"Did you observe if he returned in the same train with yourself?"

"No, mademoiselle." Then, with a meaning little laugh: "Monsieur will not remain long from Oakley."

Miss Arthur tried to look unconscious, and succeeded in looking idiotic.

"Pardon, mademoiselle, but I can't forget that night. Mademoiselle is surely relieved of one fear."

"What is that?"

"The fear of being wooed because of her wealth."

Miss Arthur started, then said: "There may be something in that, Céline; and it is not impossible that I may inherit more."

"Ah?" inquiringly.

"Yes. Probably you have learned from the servants that Mr. Arthur lost a young step-daughter not long ago; just before you came, in fact."

"I don't remember. Did she die, mademoiselle?"

"Yes. She was a very wild, unruly child, a regular little heathen—oh!"

"Pardon, oh, pardon, did it hurt?" removing a long, spiky hair pin, with much apparent solicitude.

"A—a little; yes. As I was saying, this ridiculous girl was sent to school and no expense spared to make a lady of her."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and then she rewards my brother for all his kindness by running away."

"*Merci*, mademoiselle!" suddenly recalling her French."

"And then she died among strangers, just as provokingly as she lived. She must even run away to die, to make it seem as if her home was not a happy one."

"What a very wicked young person; how you must have been annoyed."

"We were all deeply grieved."

"And I don't suppose that dead young woman was even grateful for that."

"Oh, there was no gratitude in her."

"Of course not! Now, mademoiselle, let me do your eyebrows," turning her about.

"But," pursued Miss Arthur, "when she died, my brother acquired unconditional control of a large fortune, and you must see that my brother is getting rather old. Well, in case of his death, a part, at least, of his fortune will become mine."

"Yes, madame."

"My brother is too much afraid to face the thought of death and make a new will, and papers are in existence that will give me the larger portion of his fortune. Of course, Mrs. Arthur will get her third."

Céline was now surprised in earnest.

Miss Arthur had spoken the truth. With shrewd foresight, she had made John Arthur sign certain papers two years before, in consideration of sundry loans from her. And of this state of affairs every one, except their two selves and the necessary lawyer, had remained in ignorance.

The girl's eyes gleamed. This was still better. It would make her vengeance more complete.

And now Miss Arthur was thrown into a state of girlish agitation by the appearance of Susan, who announced that Mr. Percy was in the drawing-room, awaiting the pleasure of his inamorata.

She bade Céline make haste with her complexion, and, after the lapse of something like half an hour, swept down to welcome her lover, with a great many amber silk flounces following in her wake.

Céline Leroque gazed after her for a moment and then closed the door. Flinging herself down "at ease" in the spinster's luxurious dressing chair, she pulled off the blue glasses and let the malicious triumph dance in her eyes as much as it would.

"Oh, you are a precious pair, you two, brother and sister! The one a knave, the other a fool! It is really pathetic to see how you mourn my loss, I have a great mind to——"

Here something seemed to occur to her that checked her mutterings, and sent her off into a deep meditation. After a long stillness she uttered a low, mocking laugh that had, too, a tinge of mischief in it. Rising slowly from the dressing chair, she said, as she nodded significantly to her image reflected back from Miss Arthur's dressing glass:

"I'll put that idea into execution some nice night, and then won't there be a row in the castle? Ah! my charming mistress, if you had spoken one kind or regretful word for poor Madeline, it would have been better for you!"

What was the girl meditating now? What did she mean?

"Yes, good people at Oakley, I believe I'll take a little private amusement out of you *all*, while I feel quite in the mood. I won't be too partial."

Then she betook herself to her own

room and let her thoughts fly back to Olive and Claire and—Clarence.

Presently, for she was very weary, spite of the previous night's repose, she fell asleep.

Late that evening she flitted through the woods and across the meadow to the cottage of old Hagar. Sleep had refreshed her and she had dreamed pleasant dreams. She felt stout of heart, and firm of nerve.

Old Hagar was overjoyed to see a smile in her nursling's face, and to hear, at times, a laugh, low and sweet, reminding her of olden days. The girl remained with her old nurse for nearly an hour. When they parted there was a perfect understanding between them, in regard to future movements and plans.

No one at Oakley was aware of Lucian Davlin's flying visit; this much Céline knew. But of the purport and result of that visit, she knew nothing. Nor could she guess. She must bide her time, for there seemed just now little to disturb the monotony of waiting.

One thing was, however, necessary. When the time came for Miss Arthur to leave Oakley, Céline must remain. To that end she must contrive to fall out with the spinster, and "fall in" with Madame Cora. If that lady could not be beguiled into retaining her at Oakley, she must resort to a more hazardous scheme. She had already taken a step toward ingratiating herself with Mrs. Arthur, and with tolerable success. She was maturing her plans and waiting for an opportunity to put them into action.

No doubt but that by the time she had accomplished her object, if it could be accomplished, the opposite forces would come into conflict.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SETTING SOME SNARES.

THREE days had now passed since Madeline's return from the city. On the morning of the fourth day, she seized the first leisure moment for a visit to the post-office. Instead of the single letter from Olive that she had expected, she found three.

They were enclosed in one wrapper. This she removed on her way back to Oakley, and found the first, as was the wrapper, addressed in Olive's hand. The penmanship of the second was fairy-like and beautiful, and she recognized it as Claire's. At sight of the third, her heart gave a great bound, and then almost stood still. It was superscribed in a firm, manly hand, and was, it must be, from Dr. Vaughan.

Once securely locked in her room, Madeline opened the first of her letters with eager fingers. Yes, Olive's first. The desire to see what *he* had said was strong in her heart, but she had decided not to humour her heart. She held his letter caressingly for a moment, and then putting it beside Claire's, opened and read Olive Girard's letter.

It was like Olive's self; sweet, womanly, hopeful, yet sad:

DEAR MADELINE:—I am only now beginning to realize the new life and hope you have put into my heart. As I think again of what you have done and are doing, I cannot but feel faith in your success. Oh, if I could but work with you; for you and for Philip!

Again and again I implore you to pardon me for ever doubting your wisdom or strength. If at any time I can aid you—such poor aid—my purse is yours, as your cause is mine.

Claire and Doctor Vaughan will speak for themselves. And as I dare make no more suggestions to so wise a woman, I only put in a faint little plea. Do, pray, grant Doctor Vaughan's request, and may God aid you in all that you do.

OLIVE.

"Doctor Vaughan's request!" repeated the girl. "Would that I could grant him not only all his requests, but all his wishes!"

Then she opened Claire's letter.

MY GRAND MADELINE:—How proud I am to claim you for my friend! I shall never again conduct myself with any degree of meekness toward people who have not the happiness of knowing you. And you should hear Doctor Vaughan extol you! He says you are wiser and braver than any detective. That he would trust you in any emergency. That if any one can lift the cloud that hangs over poor Philip, it is you.

My heart tells me that you will yet prove the good angel of Philip and Olive, as already you have been mine; and soon, I pray, you will become that and more to Doctor Vaughan; you must and shall. I shall have no wish ungratified when I can see your trials at an end; and yourself, surrounded by us who love you, happy at last. Don't let all these other claimants push me out of your heart; always keep one little place for your loving, grateful

CLAIRE.

Madeline's eyes were moist when she lifted them from the perusal of this letter.

"Bright, beautiful, brave Claire," she murmured; "who could help loving her?"

Then her eyes fell again upon the letter, and she started:

"'You will become that and more to Doctor Vaughan,'" she read. "What can she mean? Can it be possible that, after all, I have betrayed myself to her?"

She re-read the letter from beginning to end, her face flushing and paling.

"Oh!" she whispered softly, "she has read my heart, and we are playing at cross purposes! What a queer rivalry," the girl actually laughed; "a rivalry of renunciation. Does she yet know how he loves her, I wonder?" Then, her face growing graver, "She won't be long in making that discovery now."

She took up Clarence Vaughan's letter, almost dreading to break the seal.

MY BRAVE LITTLE SISTER:—You perceive, I have commenced my tyranny. And instead of being able to grant favours to my new sister, I am reduced to the necessity of begging them at her hands. In a word, I want to come to Bellair. Not to be a meddlesome adviser; I am too firmly a convert to your method of procedure for that. Besides, I should have to declare war upon Miss Keith if I presumed thus far. But I do desire to further your plans, and to this end would make a suggestion that has occurred to me since hearing of your marvellous detective work.

Believe me, I cannot express the admiration I feel for your darling and tact. I have no longer the faintest scruple as to trusting this issue, so important to all of us, in your hands. And I am more than proud of such a sister.

May I come to Bellair, say on Monday next? I will stop at the little station a few miles this side of the village, and walk or drive over, and find my way to the cottage of your old nurse, where you can meet me, unless you have a better place to suggest. I shall anxiously await your answer, and am your brother to command.

C. E. VAUGHAN.

Madeline's cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining.

"How they all trust me!" she ejaculated; "and they always shall. I will never be false to their friendship; no, not if to serve them my heart's blood must become wormwood and gall."

She re-read all her letters, but would not allow herself to linger too long over that of Clarence Vaughan. She had resolved to have no more weakness, no more outbreaks of passion. She was very stern with herself. Even as a friend and brother, she would not allow her thoughts to dwell too much upon him, until she grew stronger, and more perfect in her renunciation.

Then she sat down at her humble little table, and answered her letters.

To Olive she wrote a sweet, cheery note, telling of her gratitude, her affection, her hope for the future; and then she added a womanlike P. S. as follows:

Please say to Doctor Vaughan that I will be at Hagar's cottage on Monday evening, but can't tell the precise time I may be able to appear. If he follows the main road through the village, until he has passed the grounds of Oakley, he will have no difficulty in finding the cottage. It stands alone, almost in the middle of a

field, facing the west, and is the first habitation after Oakley.

"I cannot write to him," she said; "at least not now."

Then she wrote Claire a long, cheery letter, saying little of herself, and much of her friends,—of all save Doctor Vaughan. She *would* not mention him tenderly, she *could* not mention him lightly; so she would say of him nothing at all.

But if Madeline was astute, Claire, too, was beginning to develop that quality. So when the latter young lady read this letter, she smiled and said; "The dear little hypocrite! As if she could deceive me by this evidently studied neglect. Oh! you proud, stiff-necked, little detective!"

And their games of cross purpose went on.

Madeline had sealed her letters, and was about to reach for her hat preparatory to hastening with them to the post office, when her attention was arrested by a sound, slight but unusual, and not far away. She stood erect, silent, motionless, listening intently. Presently the sound was repeated, and then a look of intelligence passed over the girl's face.

"Some one is in the deserted rooms," she thought. And she abandoned for the present her purpose of going out.

There was but one way to approach the closed-up rooms, and that way led past the door of Madeline's room.

A few paces beyond the door, the hall connecting the west wing with the more modern portion, made a sharp curve and opened into the main hall of that floor. Céline Leroque opened her door cautiously, having first donned her not very becoming walking attire. Then she took up her position just outside the angle of the western hall, and so close to it that if an approach was made from below, she could easily retire behind the angle.

She had grown heartily tired of her sentinel task when, at last, a soft rustle was heard near at hand. Céline turned so quickly into the narrower hall that she fairly ran upon and stopped—Mrs. John Arthur! who uttered a sharp exclamation expressive of surprise and annoyance.

Céline poured forth a mixture of French and English, expressive of her contrition and horror at having "almost overturned madame," and wound up by saying, "Madame has been to my room? Madame has desired some service, perhaps? If so, she has only to command."

Cora drew a breath of relief, having sufficiently recovered from the collision and accompanying confusion, to draw a breath of any kind, and at once rallied her forces.

"Yes, Céline, I wanted you to do something for me, if you will."

"Anything, madame."

Madame was collecting her thoughts. "I—I wanted to ask if you could find time to come to my room and try and do something with my hair. Your hair-dressing is perfect, and I am so tired of my own.

Céline would be only too happy. Should she come now? She had just returned from the village; she would put off her hat and be at madame's disposal. But madame was not inclined to be manipulated just then. Céline might come to her dressing room and do her hair for dinner—after she was done with Miss Arthur, of course.

So they separated, mutually satisfied.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A VERITABLE GHOST.

WHAT a day of glory it had been to the spinster, this day on which Madeline had read her three letters, and Cora had explored the shut-up wing.

And what a day of torture to fastidious Edward Percy, who would have welcomed any third presence, even Cora or John Arthur—any one, anything was better than that long slavery at the feet of a painted and too-visibly ancient mistress. But even the longest days have an end. At last he was

set at liberty, and he hurried back to the little inn, literally kicking his way through the Autumn darkness.

The old house of Oakley stood, with its last light extinguished, tall and sombre against a back ground of black sky and blacker trees. At last every soul under it's roof was asleep—all but one. That one was very wide awake and intent on mischief.

Love-making, dear reader, although you may not know it, is a wearisome business, even if ever so agreeable. Especially is it wearisome to those like Miss Arthur—maidens whose waists are too tight, whose complexions will ill-endure lip service, and whose tresses are liable to become not only dishevelled but dislocated. Therefore, when Miss Arthur dismissed her lover, with a sigh of regret, she lost no time in doffing her glories, with a sigh of relief.

Even a very rich and hearty luncheon, which her maid had provided, was gormandized rather than enjoyed, so tempting did her couch look to the worn-out damsel.

Miss Arthur had refreshed herself with an hour's uninterrupted repose, and was revelling in a dreamy Arcadia, hand in hand with her beloved, when something cold falling on her cheek dispelled her visions. She started broad awake, and face to face with a horrible reality.

The moon was pouring a flood of silvery light in through the two windows, facing the south, whose curtains were drawn back, making the room almost as light as at midday.

And there, near her bed, almost within reach of her hand, stood *Madeline Payne*, all swathed in white clinging cerements, ghastly as a corpse, hollow-eyed and awful, but, nevertheless, Madeline Payne! Over her white temples dropped rings of curly, yellow hair, and across the pale lips a mocking smile was flitting.

Miss Arthur gasped and closed her eyes very tight, but they would not stay closed. They flew open again to behold the vision still there. The spinster was transfixed with horror. Cold drops of perspiration oozed out upon her forhead and trickled down her nose. She clutched at the bedclothes convulsively, and gazed and gazed.

Wider and wider stared her eyes, but no sound escaped her lips. She gazed and gazed, but the spectre would not vanish. Poor Miss Arthur was terror-stricken almost to the verge of catalepsy.

In consideration of the persistence with which they return again and again, according to good authority, ghosts in general must be endowed with much patience. Be this as it may of the average ghost, certain it is that this particular apparition, after glaring immovably at the spinster for the space of five minutes, began to find it monotonous.

Slowly, slowly from among the snowy drapery came forth a white hand, that pointed at the occupant of the bed with silent menace.

The spell was broken. The lips of Miss Arthur were unclosed, and shrieks, one following the other in rapid succession, resounded in the ears of even the most remote sleepers.

With the utterance of her first yell, Miss Arthur had made a desperate plunge for the further side of the bed, away from the spectre; and turning her face to the wall, shut out thus the appalling white vision.

Having once found her voice, Miss Arthur continued to clutch at the bed clothes, glare at the wall, and shriek spasmodically, even after her "inner consciousness" must have assured her that the room now held others beside herself and the ghost, supposing it to be still on the opposite side of the bed.

Cora, in a state of wild *déshabillé;* John Arthur, ditto, and armed with a cane; Susan and Mary, half in the room and half out; then Céline Leroque, apparently much frightened, without knowing at what.

A volley of questions from the master of the house, and a return of courage to the mistress. But Miss Arthur only gathered herself together, took in a fresh supply of breath, and embarked in another series of howls.

Nothing was amiss in the room; it could

not have been a burglar. The night lamp was burning dimly behind its heavy shade; on the table were the fragments of Miss Arthur's lunch; and Mr. and Mrs. Arthur had found easy access through the closed, but unbolted door.

After a time, a long time, during which Cora and Céline administered sal volatile and other restoratives, Mr. Arthur douched her with oaths and ice water, and the servants whispered in a group, the maiden found voice.

It was a very feeble voice, and it conveyed to her audience the astonishing intelligence that she had seen a ghost—Madeline Payne's ghost.

Upon hearing her story, John Arthur seemed at first a little startled. But Cora only laughed, and Céline, glancing significantly at the lunch table, said, with a slight smile:

"Mademoiselle has nerves, and she may have lunched heartily before retiring."

John Arthur strode across the room and viewed the *debris* of luncheon. "Humph!" he grunted. "Oysters and salads, potted meat and pastry; strong coffee and lemon syllabub with brandy. Good Lord, I don't know what should have kept the contents of an entire cemetery from sweeping down upon your slumbers, you female gourmand. Ghosts indeed?"

And he stamped out of the room in high dudgeon. His tirade was wholly lost upon his sister, however, for that lady was whimpering comfortably and putting all her feeble energy into the effort.

Cora glanced up as the door banged after her lord and master, and ordered the servants back to bed. Then she turned toward Céline, saying:

"That door was certainly not locked when we came to it, for I was here even sooner than Mr. Arthur."

Céline smiled again: "Mademoiselle dismissed me before she had finished her luncheon. I had disrobed her previously, and she said she should retire as soon as she drank her coffee. She may have forgotten the door."

Cora turned toward the bed. "Did you lock your door, Ellen?"

But Ellen did not know; she could not remember if she had or had not.

Then Cora said to Céline: "I am glad to find you so sensible. We shall have hard work now to convince those ridiculous servants that there is not a ghost in every corner."

"I do not think that graves open," replied the girl, seriously.

Then she gave her undivided attention to her mistress, who bade fair to be hysterical for the rest of the night.

Miss Arthur would not be left alone again. No argument could convince her that the spectre was born of her imagination, and therefore not likely to return So Cora bade Céline prepare to spend the remainder of the night in Miss Arthur's dressing-room.

Accordingly, Céline withdrew to her own apartment, where her preparations were made as follows:

First, she shook out the folds of a sheet that hung over a chair, and restored it to its proper place on the bed. Then she removed from her dressing stand a box of white powder, and brushed away all traces of said powder from her garments and the floor. Next, she carefully hid away a key that had fallen to the floor and lay near the classically folded sheet. These things accomplished, she made a few additions to her toilet, extinguished the light, locked her door carefully, trying it afterward to make assurance doubly sure, and retraced her steps to relieve Cora, who was dutifully sitting by the spinster's bed, and beginning to shiver in her somewhat scanty drapery.

As the night wore on, and Miss Arthur became calmed and quiet, the girl lay back in the big dressing chair, gazing into the grate, and thinking. Her thoughts were sometimes of Claire, sometimes of Clarence; of the Girards, and of Edward Percy; then of her success as a ghostess, and at this she would almost laugh.

But from every subject her mind would turn again and again to one question, that

repeated itself until it took the form of a goblin and danced through her dreams, when at last she slept, whispering over and over:

"What is it that Cora Arthur carries in a belt about her waist? what is it? what is it?"

For the girl had made a strange discovery while Cora was sitting beside Miss Arthur's bed, clad only in night's scanty drapery.

CHAPTER XXV.

SOME DAYS OF WAITING.

Doctor Vaughan had written that he could find his way with ease to Nurse Hagar's cottage, and he did.

Swinging himself down upon the dark end of the platform, when the evening train puffed into Bellair village, he crossed the track, and walked rapidly along the path that led in the direction of the cottage. He strode on until the light from the cottage window gleamed out upon the night, and his way led over the field. Half way between the stile and the cottage, a form, evidently that of a woman, appeared before him, and coming in his direction.

The figure came nearer, and a voice, that was certainly not Madeline's, said: "Is the gentleman going to old Hagar's cottage?"

"Are you Hagar?" replied Clarence, Yankee fashion.

"I am Hagar; and you are?"

"Doctor Vaughan."

"Then pass on, sir; the one you seek is there."

And the old woman waved her hand toward the light and hobbled on.

Clarence stared after her for a moment; but the darkness had devoured her, and he resumed his way toward the cottage.

In hastening to meet a friend we naturally have, in our mind, a picture. Our friend will look so, or so. Thus with Clarence Vaughan. Expecting to meet a pair of deep, sad, beautiful eyes, lifted to his own; to behold a fair forehead shadowed by soft, shining curls; judge of Clarence's surprise when the opened door revealed to him a small being of no shape in particular; a very black head of hair, surmounted by an ugly maid's cap; and a pair of unearthly staring blue glasses.

Madeline had chosen to appear "in character" at this interview. She intended to keep her own personality out of sight, and she felt that she needed the aid and concealment that her disguise would afford. She would give Claire's schemes no vantage ground.

So Madeline Payne was carefully hidden away under the wig and pigment and padding; and Celine Leroque courtseyed demurely as she held the door open to admit him, and said;

"Good evening, *Monsieur le Docteur*; you perceive I am here before you."

"Rather, I don't perceive it. *You* are here before me in a double sense of the word; yes. And I suppose you call yourself——"

"Celine Leroque, at your service: maid-in-waiting to Miss Arthur, of Oakley."

Doctor Vaughan laughed.

"Well, won't you shake hands with an American of no special importance, Celine Leroque?"

She placed her hand in his and then drew forward a chair.

"I hope you found no difficulty in getting out to-night?" he said, sitting down and looking at her with a half-amused, half-grave countenance.

"None whatever; I have been suffering with a sick-headache all day."

"And you can get in again unseen?"

"Easily; in the evening the servants are all below stairs."

"But what an odd disguise; Do they never question your blue glasses?"

Not half so much as they would question the eyes without them. They believe my eyes were ruined by close application to fine needle-work. And then—" she pushed up the glasses a trifle, and he saw

hat the eyelid, and a line underneath the eye, were artistically *rouged*—" they all acknowledge that my eyes look very weak."

"I fancy they'll find those eyes have looked to sharply for them, by and by."

She laughed lightly. "I hope so."

Sitting there in her prim disguise, the girl felt glad to gaze upon him; felt as if, look as much as she would, she was gazing from a safe distance.

Dr. Vaughan came straight to the point of his visit, beginning by requesting a repetition of such portion of the facts she had discovered as related most particularly to the two men, Davlin and Percy. Then he made a suggestion. To his surprise it was a welcome one to the girl.

"That is just what I have had in mind," she said thoughtfully. "After reflecting, I have changed my plans somewhat, and I don't see my way quite so clearly as before."

He was looking at her attentively, but asked no questions.

"Since I came to the city," she resumed, with some hesitation, "I have thought that I would be glad to talk again with all of you. But it won't do to incur the risk of more absences, for if I do not mistake the signs, things will be pretty lively up there," nodding in the direction of Oakley, 'before many days. So perhaps we had better see what our two heads can develop in the way of counter-plot, and you can make known the result to Olive."

"If your own invention will not serve, I fear mine will be at an utter loss. But you know how glad I shall be to share your confidence."

"My invention must serve," she said firmly, and quite ignoring the latter clause of his speech; "and so must yours. You see, my plan before going to the city was a comparetively simple one. I intended to work my way into the confidence of Mrs. John Arthur. Failing in that, Hagar must have been reinstated, and the *dénouement* would have been easy: to get possession of specimens of the medicine prescribed for Mr. Arthur; to hunt down this sham doctor they are to introduce into the house; to show John Arthur the manner of wife he has; to make my own terms with him, and then expose and turn out the whole pack. But all this must be changed."

"Changed? And how?

"I can,t turn them out of Oakley. I must keep them there, every one of them, at any cost."

Dr. Vaughan looked puzzled. "We can't allow them to kill that old man, not even to vindicate poetical justice," he said, gravely.

"No; we can't allow just that. But don't you see, if we turn these people away now, we defeat a chief end and aim—the liberation of Philip Girard?"

"True."

"Well this is why I have changed my plan."

He looked at her with an admiration that was almost homage.

"And you will give up your own vengeance, for the sake of Olive and her happiness?"

She laughed oddly. "Not at all. I only defer it, to make it the more complete. Now, listen to what I propose to do, and see if you can suggest anything safer or better."

And then she unfolded a plan that made Clarence Vaughan start in amazement, but which, after it was fully revealed, he could not amend nor condemn. He could see no other way by which all that they aimed at could be accomplished.

"Of course, the plan has its risks," concluded the girl. "But we could try no other scheme without incurring the same, or greater. And I *believe* that I shall not fail."

"I wish it were not necessary that you should undergo so much; think what it will be for you," gently.

"Oh, for me, . . ." indifferently; "I shall be less of a spy, and more of an actress—that is all."

"Then I shall set the detectives at work?"

"Immediately."

"Have you any further instructions, any clue, to give them?"

"Nothing; it is to be simply a research. Neither must know to what end the information is desired. It will be better to employ your men from different Agencies, so that one may not know of the other, or his business."

"And is there nothing more I can do?"

"Nothing, for the present. When once we get these men together, we shall all have our hands full. Then you can help me, perhaps, as I suggested.

"Well," sighing, and looking at his watch, "it's a strange business, and a difficult, for a young girl like you. But we are in your hands; you are worth a thousand such as I."

"Nonsense," she said, almost angrily. Then, abruptly, "When does Claire return to Baltimore?"

He started and flushed under her gaze. "I—I really don't know."

"Then, as my brother, I command you to know all about Claire. She is my special charge to you. And you are to tell her, from me, that I won't have her go away."

"Then I must do all in my power to detain her? Your command will have more effect than all of my prayers," he said, softly.

"Well, keep on reiterating my commands and your prayers, then; by and by she won't be able to distinguish the one from the other. What time is it?"

He smiled at the sudden change of tone and subject. "Half-past nine," he said.

While the words were on his lips, old Hagar entered.

Clearly it was time to end the interview. Doctor Vaughan must be ready for the return train, which flew cityward soon, and Céline Leroque must not be too long absent. So there were a few words more about their plans, a few courteous sentences addressed to Hagar by Dr. Vaughan, and then they separated.

The next day two men were at work—following like sleuth hounds the trail on which they were put, unravelling slowly, slowly, the webs of the past that had been spun by the two men who were to be hunted down.

And now came a time of compara ive dullness at Oakley. Even eventful lives do not always pace onward to the inspiring clang of trumpet and drum. There is the bivouac and the time of rest, even though sleeping upon their arms, for all the hosts that were ever marshalled to battle.

Céline Leroque found life rather more dreary than she had expected during these days of inaction. After all, it is easier to be brave than to be patient. So, in spite of her courage and her self-sacrifice, she was restless and unhappy.

And she was not alone in her restlessness. It is curious to note what diverse causes produce the same effects. Cora Arthur was restless, very restless. The fruit of her labour was in her hands, but it was vapid, tasteless, unsatisfying. What *her* soul clamoured for was the opera, the contact of kindred spirits, the rush and whirl, the smoke and champagne, and giddiness of the city; the card-won gold, and painted folly that made the be-all and end-all of life to such as she.

She did not lose sight of the usefulness she trusted to find in Céline Leroque, however. During these days of *ennui* and quietude, the two came to a very good understanding; not all at once, and not at all definite. Only, by degrees, Cora became convinced that Céline Leroque cherished a very laudable contempt for her would-be-girlish mistress, and that she was becoming rather weary in her service. Once, indeed, the girl had said, as if unable to restrain herself, and while dressing Mrs. Cora's yellow hair—a task which she professed to delight in:

"Ah! madame, if only it was *you* who were my mistress! It is a pleasure to dress a beautiful mistress, but to be con-

stantly at war against nature, to make an old one young—faugh! it is labour."

And Cora had been much amused and had held out a suggestion that, in case of any rupture between mistress and maid, the latter should apply to her.

But if existence was a pain to Céline, and a weariness to Cora, it was anguish unutterable to Edward Percy. He would have been glad to put a long span of miles between his inamorata and himself had he not felt that, with Cora in the same house as his fair one, it were more discreet to be on the ground, and watch over his prey pretty closely. But to this man, who made love to every pretty woman as a child eats *bon bons*, the task of wooing where his eyes was not pleased, his ear was not soothed, and his vanity not in the least flattered, was intensely wearisome.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NOT A BAD DAY'S WORK.

THE first thing that Doctor Vaughan did on returning from Bellair, was to seek an interview with Henry, the dark servant of Lucian Davlin.

It was a mixed motive that had first prompted Henry to espouse the cause of a helpless, friendless girl, a motive composed of one part inward wrath, long nourished, against the haughty and over-exacting Lucian, and one part pity for the young girl, who, as his experienced eyes told him, was not such as were the women who had usually been entertained by his master.

He had expected to assist her to escape from the place, to enjoy his master's chagrin, and to see the matter end there. But Madeline's illness had changed the current of events, and strengthened his determination to stand her friend, if need be, more especially when Olive, pressing upon him a generous gift, had signified her wish that he should continue in Madeline's service. She had added that when he chose to leave his present master, she would see that he fell into no worse hands, for so long as the sick girl remained under that shelter, Olive felt that the man must be their servant, not Davlin's. And to do him justice, Henry had long since become truly attached to the two ladies.

He lost no time in responding to the summons of Doctor Vaughan, and was eager to know of the welfare of the "young lady" and Mrs. Girard. Doctor Vaughan satisfied him on this point, and then said:

"I am authorised by Miss Payne to see you, and ask some questions that she thinks you may be able to answer. First, then," said the doctor, in his kindly manner, "how long have you been with your present master?"

"Nearly three years, sir."

"And how long has the woman whom he calls Cora been known to you?"

"She has been known to me all that time, sir," replied Henry.

"You first saw her in company with Davlin?"

"No, sir, she came to his rooms when I had been there but a few days, and ordered me about like a countess. I didn't know the ropes then, but she made me know my duty soon enough," dryly.

"Evidently, then, she and your master were friends of long standing, even at that time?"

"Yes, sir,"

"You used to hear them talk often, I suppose?"

"I used to hear part of their talks. They seemed not to care to have even so much of a machine as I, hear them at all times."

"Now, will you try and recall some of these fragments of talk? Think if you heard them speak of their travels, together or separately, and if you can recall the names of any persons or places they have mentioned.

Henry pondered. "I think," he said, after a time, "that they have been in Europe together. In fact I am sure of it."

Doctor Vaughan started. "Oh! that is to the point. You don't recall any time mentioned?

"No, sir. They used to talk of luck with the cards, and sometimes spoke of operas or plays, and almost always disagreed. Sometimes I would hear him describing men to her, and she seemed to be getting ready for a part in some 'game' that he was trying to play."

"Very likely."

"Once I heard them having high words about some old man that she had been fleecing, and he said that she had carried the thing too far, and that if she did not keep out of the old man's way, she might get into trouble. I heard the name," putting a forefinger to his forehad, and wrinkling his brows, "it was—was—Verage; 'old Verage' she called him."

"Verage!"

"That was the name; I am sure, sir."

Clarence took out a note-book, and made an entry.

"When did this conversation take place?" he asked.

"Not more than two months before the young lady was brought there, sir."

"Ah!" Evidently a fresh glimmer of light had been thrown on the subject. "And you heard nothing more about this old man?"

"No, sir. I think she must have gone away from town at that time, for I did not see her again, until," here Henry seemed to catch at some new thought.

"Until when?" asked Doctor Vaughan, with some eagerness.

"The day before the young lady came," said Henry, in a low tone, and moving a step nearer the doctor. "Madame Cora came dashing up in a close carriage, and she wore a heavy veil. I noticed that because she was rather fond of displaying her face and hair, and I hardly ever saw her wear anything that would hide them. She came up-stairs and ordered me to send a telegram, which she had already written, to my master. I sent it, and she stayed there all day. She sent me out for her meals, and I served them in the large room. She spent the most of the time in walking up and down—that was her way when she was worried or angry—and looking out between the curtains. My master answered the telegram, but when the midnight train came in, a man who went down in the country with him, a sort of tool and hanger-on of his, came to me while I was waiting below, and told me to tell Mistress Cora that the train was a few minutes late."

"Stop a moment. This man who was Davlin's companion, what was his name?"

"I never heard him called anything but 'The Professor.'"

"The Professor! And how did he look?" making another entry in his note-book.

"He was a middle-aged man, sir, not so tall as master, rather square in the shoulders, and stout built. He wore no beard, and was always smoking a pipe."

"Very good," writing rapidly. "Now, then, let us return to the lady."

"Well, sir, she was very impatient until my master came, and then they had a long talk. I heard him speak of the old man Verage again, and she seemed a little afraid, or annoyed, I don't know which. Then he seemed to be telling her of some new scheme, and there was a great deal of planning and some chaffing about her going into the country. Just at daybreak they sent me for a carriage, and she went away in it, closely veiled as before. He told her he would join her without fail. I have not seen her since. That same morning he brought out the beautiful young lady to his rooms, and," smiling so as to show all his white teeth, "I think you know all the rest, sir."

Clarence nodded and then appeared lost in thought. Finally, he lifted his head from the hand that had supported it, and said:

"Since your master has returned to town, how does he employ his time?"

"Very much as usual."

"And that is in ——"

"Gaming."

"Is it true, Henry, that the room below your master's apartments is fitted up for private gambling?"

Henry stirred uneasily, and looked his answer.

Doctor Vaughan smiled. "I see how it is," he said. "Well, then, this man, the Professor, do you see much of him of late?"

"A great deal deal, sir; he is very often with my master at his rooms, but they never go out together. They have had a great deal of privacy lately; something new is afoot."

This man is a sort of decoy-duck, I fancy?"

"Yes; what the gamblers call a capper, or roper-in."

"Well, Henry, I think I won't detain you longer now. Take this," putting into his hand a twenty-dollar bill, "and keep your eyes and ears open. If your master leaves town, observe if the Professor disappears at the same time."

Henry expressed his gratitude and his entire willingness to keep an eye upon the doings of Mr. Davlin and the Professor, and bowed himself out, muttering as he went; "They will make it lively for my fine master before very long, and I think I am on the side that will win."

Meantime, Clarence Vaughan, quick in thought and action, was hurrying on his gloves preparatory to a sally forth on a new mission. Henry had given him a hint that might turn out of much value, for among the patients then on the young doctor's visiting list, was one Verage, old, ugly and fabulously rich.

First of all, Clarence Vaughan called at the Agency which had been decided upon as the best one to entrust with the investigation relative to Mr. Edward Percy. He gave his man no clue to the present whereabouts of his subject, but set him back ten years or more, sending him to visit the scenes of school episode, and bidding him trace the life of the man, with the aid of such clues as he thought best to give, up to that time. Next, he visited another Agency, and placed a man upon the track of Lucian Davlin.

Then he called a carriage and drove straight to the residence of old Samuel Verage. It was early in the day for a professional visit or for a visit of any kind. Nevertheless, Doctor Vaughan was admitted without delay, to the presence of the master of the house.

Old Samuel Verage sat in his large, softly-cushioned arm-chair, in a gorgeously beflowered dressing gown.

He was glowering over the dainty dishes which had lately contained a bountiful breakfast. Evidently he fancied that the doctor had called in anticipation of a serious morning attack, or to choke off his too greedy appetite, for be chuckled maliciously as Clarence entered the room, and greeted him with,

"Oh! You thought you were ahead of me this time, didn't you? I say, now, *did* you think I would be worse this morning?"

Clarence surveyed his patient with considerable amusement.

"You won't suffer from a hearty breakfast. It is the supper that you must look out for. But my call this morning was, in part, to inquire about a lady."

"About a lady! Of course, of course; go ahead; who is she?"

"That's precisely what I want to know. The fact is, my business is rather peculiar, and delicate."

The old man rubbed his hands gleefully. "Good! very good! A mystery about a woman! Come out with it; don't be backward."

"Very well; the woman that I want to inquire about has been known as Cora Weston."

Old Verage fairly bounced out of his seat as he yelled: "Cora Weston! Where is she? What do you know about her?"

"Not quite enough, or I should not have ventured to inquire of you," said Clarence, calmly.

Old Verage tumbled into his chair again.

"Then you don't know where she is?" sharply.

"What could you do if I put her in your power?"

"Lock her up in jail, if I wanted to," fiercely.

Little by little Clarence Vaughan extracted from the old man the details of the plausible scheme by which Davlin and Cora had succeeded in transferring a very considerable amount of cash from his pockets to their own. He felt elated at the result of this interview. It placed a weapon in his hands that might be wielded with telling effect when time served.

"Well, you may be able to get even with her yet," he said, rising to go, after Verage had concluded his tirade; "many thanks for giving me some information. I may be able to return the compliment soon."

"But hold on!" cried Verage, as if seized by a new thought; "I say, now, what is all this questioning about?"

"Some of her sharp practice has come to my knowledge, and she has made a little trouble for one of my friends. I want to know all that I can about her, for it may be necessary to put a stop to her career."

With a renewed expression of his thanks for the information given, Clarence bowed himself out of the old man's presence, with a sense of relief at inhaling the fresh, pure air of the outer world. Then he turned his steps homeward, assured that it had been a good day's work well done.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CLAIRE TURNS CIRCE.

THERE was more to tell than to learn, when Clarence called, a day or two later, at the villa.

The expert who had been dogging the steps of Lucian Davlin, had made his report, it is true. But that report was a very unsatisfactory affair:

A man, whom Clarence readily identified with the Professor, was an almost constant visitor at the rooms of the Man of Luck, but they, that is, the Professor and Davlin, were never seen on the street together, nor, indeed, anywhere else. In short, Lucian Davlin had been closely shadowed, but with no success to speak of. He came and went just as such a man usually does. And no person that might be made to answer for a doctor, had been visited by him or had visited him unless, and this began to appear possible, the Professor himself was the man.

After a long and serious discussion of the pros and cons of the case, Olive and Clarence decided they would instruct the detective to transfer his attentions to the Professor, only keeping a general *surveillance* over Davlin. They began to fear that they were watching the wrong man.

Those were pleasant days to Doctor Vaughan; the days when he rode down to the pretty villa to consult with Olive and to look at Claire.

And those were pleasant days to Claire as well. Once, and that not long before, she had taken but little interest in Clarence Vaughan. She had thought of him very much as had Madeline that first night of their meeting, when she looked at him sitting near her in a railway carriage, and regarded him as just a "somewhat odd young man with a good face." Now, Madeline thought him not only the noblest but the handsomest of men. And Claire was beginning to agree with her.

But on one thing she was determined. Doctor Vaughan must learn to look upon her only as a friend, and he must learn to love Madeline. So Claire and Clarence vied with each other in chanting the praises of Madeline Payne, and learned to know each other better because of her.

One day when he called, Claire chanced to be alone. Somehow she found it hard to be quite at her ease when there was no Olive at hand, behind whom to screen her personality from the eyes that might overlook that sisterly barrier, but could not

overleap it. If his eyes had said less, or if she could have compelled her lips to say more! But her usually active tongue seemed to lack for words, and she found herself talking in a reckless and somewhat incoherent manner upon all sorts of topics, which she dragged forward in order to keep in check the words which the look in his eyes heralded so plainly.

When she was almost at her wit's end, and tempted to flee ingloriously in search of Olive, that lady entered and Claire felt as if saved from lunacy. But she could not quite shake off the consciousness that had awakened in her, and soon framed an excuse for leaving the room. Once having escaped, she did not return, nor did Olive see her again until she came down to dinner, and Doctor Vaughan had gone.

While lingering over that meal, Olive said, after they had talked of Madeline through three courses, "I think, by-the-by, that Doctor Vaughan expected to see you again before he went."

If I were writing of impossible heroines, I might say that Claire looked conscious; but real women who are not all chalk and water, do not display their feelings so readily to their mothers and sisters. So Claire Keith looked up with the countenance of an astonished kitten.

"To see me? What for?"

"How should I know, if you don't?" smiling slightly.

"And *how* should I know?" carelessly.

"Well, perhaps I was mistaken. But why have you kept your room all this afternoon?"

"I have been packing. Please pass the marmalade."

"Packing!" mechanically reaching out the required dainty.

"Yes, packing. You don't think I came to spend the winter, do you?"

"But this is so sudden."

"Now, just listen, you unreasonable being!" assuming an air of grave admonition. "Don't you know that I have overstayed my time by almost a month?"

"Yes, but —"

"Well, don't you know that if I tell you beforehand that I am going, you always contrive excuses and hatch plots, to keep me at least three weeks longer?"

"I plead guilty," laughed Olive.

"Well, you see I have stayed out my days of grace already. And knowing your failing, and feeling sure that I could not humour it, I have just taken advantage of you, and packed my trunks."

"And you won't stay just one more little week?"

Claire laughed gleefully. "What did I say? It is your old cry. Now, dear, be reasonable. Mamma wants me, and the boys want me You have plenty of occupation just now. It will take you one-third of the time to keep me informed of all that happens."

"Well," sighed Olive, "of course you must go some time; but you don't mean to go to-morrow?"

"I do, though."

"What will Doctor Vaughan say?"

"Whatever Doctor Vaughan pleases. I can't lose a day to say good-bye to him, can I?"

"But why didn't you tell him good-bye to-day?"

Claire looked up in some surprise. "Upon my word, I never thought of it."

And she told the truth. She had thought only of how she could avoid another meeting.

Olive looked puzzled. "And I supposed that you liked Doctor Vaughan," she said, after a moment's pause.

"Why, and so I do; I was very careless, Olive, dear, pray make my adieus to him, and all the necessary excuses. I do like the doctor, and don't want him to think me rude."

And Olive accepted the commission, and was deceived by it. For she, absorbed in her own fears and hopes, was not aware of the drama of love and cross purposes that was being enacted under her very eyes.

When Clarence called, on the next day but one, he found, to his surprise and sorrow, that the bright face of the girl he

loved so well was to smile upon him no more, at least for a time. Making his call an unusually brief one, he rode back to the city in a very grave and thoughtful mood. Or, rather, the gravity and thoughtfulness usual in him was tinged with sadness.

On the same day, almost at the same hour, Claire Keith stood in her mother's drawing-room, answering the thousand and one questions that are invariably poured into the ears of a returned traveller.

By and by, drawing back the satin curtain, that shaded the windows of the drawdrawing-room, Claire gazed out upon the familiar street which seemed smiling her a welcome in the autumn sunshine. Finally she uttered an exclamation of surprise, and turned to Mrs. Keith.

"*Merci!* Mamma! what has happened to the people across the way? Why, I can't catch even one glimpse of red and yellow damask, not one flutter of gold fringe; have the *parvenus* been taking lessons in good taste? Positively, every blind is closed, and there isn't a liveried being to be seen."

Mrs. Keith laughed softly. "I don't know what has happened to the *parvenus*, my dear, but whether good or bad it has taken them away, liveries and all. The house has a new tenant, who is not so amusing, perhaps, but is certainly more mysterious. So, after all, the exchange may not have been a gain to the neighbourhood."

Claire peeped out again. "A mysterious tenant, you say, mamma? That must be an improvement. What is the Mystery like?"

Mrs. Keith smiled indulgently on her daughter.

"There is not much to tell, my love. I don't know whether the lady who has taken the house is young or old, handsome or ugly, married or single. She lives the life of a recluse; has never been seen, at least by any of us, to walk out. But she drives sometimes in a close carriage, and always with a thick veil hiding her face. She is tall, dresses richly, but always in black, although the fabric is not that usually worn as mourning. She moves from the door to her carriage with a languid gait, as if she might be an invalid. No one goes there, and I understand she is not at home to callers, although, of course, I have not made the experiment myself. There, my dear, I think that is about all."

"She seems to be a woman of wealth?"

"Evidently; her horses are very fine animals, and her carriage a costly one. Her servants wear a neat, plain livery, and apparently her house is elegantly furnished.

"And mamma," said Robbie, who had been standing quietly at her side, "you forget the flowers."

"True, Bobbie. Every day, Claire, the florist leaves a basket of white flowers at her door."

"I like that," asserted Claire. "She must have refinement,"

"She certainly has that air."

"Well," said Claire, laughing lightly, "I shall make a study of the woman across the way."

With that the subject dropped for the time. But as the days went on, and she settled herself once more into the home routine, Claire found that not the least among the things she chose to consider interesting, was the mysterious neighbour across the way,"

And now, having put considerable distance between herself and Edward Percy, she wrote him a few cool lines of dismissal.

And here again the individuality of the girl was very manifest. Many a woman would have written a scathing letter, telling the man how thoroughly unmasked he stood in her sight, letting him know that she was acquainted with all his past and his present, and bidding him make the most of the infatuation of the last victim to his empty pockets, the ancient Miss Arthur.

What Claire did was like Claire; and perhaps, after all, she best comprehended the nature she dealt with. Certainly no tirade of accusing scorn could have so

wounded the self-love of the selfish, conscienceless man as did her cool farewell missive.

Edward Percy was in a very complacent mood when Claire's letter reached him. True, he had received no reply to his two last effusions; but knowing that Claire must be soon returning to her home, if she had not already gone, he assured himself that it was owing to this that he had received no letter as yet. He never doubted her attachment to himself. That was not in his nature.

Opening a rather heavy packet, as he sat in his cosy sitting-room, out dropped two letters; two letters full of poetry and fine sentiment, that his own flexible hand had penned and addressed to Miss Claire Keith. His letters, and returned with the seals unbroken. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses. His handsome, treacherous, light-blue eyes darkened and widened with astonishment and anger.

He never moved in a hurry, never spoke in a hurry, never thought in a hurry. And slowly it dawned upon his mind to investigate further and find some clue that would make this unheard-of thing appear less incomprehensible. Accordingly he took up the envelope that had contained his rejected letters, and drew from it a brief note:

BALTIMORE, Saturday, 6th.

It will scarcely surprise Mr. Percy to learn that Miss Keith desires now to end an acquaintance that has been, doubtless, amusing "intellectually" and "socially" to both.

Of course, a gentleman so worldly-wise as himself can never have been misled by the semblance of attachment, that has seemed necessary in order to make such an acquaintance as ours at all interesting. A flirtation based upon a "sympathy of intellect," must of necessity end sooner or later, and has, no doubt, been as harmless to him as to CLAIRE KEITH.

Yes, without doubt Claire knew how to hurt this man most. He was not permitted to know that she felt the keen humiliation, which a proud nature must suffer when it discovers that it has trusted an unworthy object. Instead, he was to feel himself the injured one; the one humiliated. He, the deceiver, must own himself deceived. When he believed himself loved, he was laughed at. His own words were flung in his teeth in an insolent mockery. "A sympathy of intellect"; yes, he had used these words so often. He had obeyed the beckoning of Circe, and now she held out to him his swine's reward of husks.

Edward Percy had been dissatisfied with others, with circumstances, and surroundings, many a time and oft; but to-day, for the very first time, he felt dissatisfied with himself.

And Claire had revenged her wrongs twofold.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CURTAIN RISES ON THE MIMIC STAGE

ALWAYS, in life, little events pave the way for great catastrophes. The mine burns slowly until the explosive point is reached, and then—

Fate was taking a leisurely gait, seemingly, and moving affairs at Oakley with a deliberation that was almost hesitating. Nevertheless, things were moving, and in the wake of little events, great ones could already be discerned by the plotters and counter-plotters, who waited and watched.

Céline Leroque was in better spirits than usual, in these days. Indeed, considering how exceedingly probable it seemed that she would be turned adrift at any hour by her present mistress, Céline was very cheerful.

And Miss Arthur had cause to complain. Beyond a doubt her French maid was becoming careless, very careless.

Sometimes Miss Arthur was inclined to think that her scant locks of well-dyed hair were pulled quite unnecessarily, while her head was under Céline's hands. But this she endured like a Spartan, only exclaiming when the torture became un-

bearable. And when she finally ventured a protest, disastrous was the outcome.

With many an apology, Céline fingered the curls and braids, inquiring with every touch of the hand or adjustment of a hair-pin: "Does that hurt, mademoiselle?"

Being assured, when the hair-dressing was done, that she had accomplished the task without inflicting so much as a single twinge of pain, she held open the door for her mistress, cooing her satisfaction and beaming with delight.

But alas for the poor spinster! Before she had been half an hour in the society of her beloved *fiance*, her unfortunate habit of tossing and wriggling her head brought Céline's gingerly architecture to grief. A sudden twist tumbled down a full half of the glossy "crown of glory" from Miss Arthur's head to Mr. Percy's feet, and—we draw a veil over the confusion of the unhappy spinster.

The lady having retired to her dressing-room to relieve her feelings and repair damages, a scene was enacted in which the lady did the histrionics and the maid apoligised and giggled alternately, until the one had exhausted her anthem of wrath and the other her accompaniment of penitence and giggles.

Then a truce was patched up, which lasted for several days.

Céline had advanced to the verge of disrespect, when speaking of Mr. Percy, on more than one occasion. Several times she had said that he "had a familiar look," and she fancied she had seen him somewhere. But she had always checked herself on the very border-land of impertinence, and never had been able to tell if she really had before seen the gentleman or not.

But she had put the spinster on the defensive, and had also excited her curiosity.

During this time Mrs. John Arthur was slowly dropping into her *rôle* of invalid. First, she gave up her habitual walks about the grounds and on the terrace. Then, her drives became too fatiguing. Next, she found herself too languid to appear at breakfast, and that meal was served in her room. She was not ill, she protested; only a trifle indisposed. Let no one be at all concerned for her; she should be as well as usual in a few days. And Céline, who was very sympathetic, and was the first to suggest that a physician be consulted, was laughingly assured that if madame were sick, she, Céline, should be her head nurse.

Mrs. Arthur had been absent from the family breakfast table for two days, when Miss Arthur met with a fresh grievance at the hands of Céline.

Céline had been unusually garrulous, and had been regaling her mistress with descriptions of the great people, and the magnificent toilets she had seen, while with some of her former *miladis*. Suddenly she dropped the subject of a grand ball which had transpired in Baltimore, where her mistress was the guest of the honourable somebody, to exclaim:

"It has just come to me, mademoiselle, where I must have seen Monsieur Percy. It was in Baltimore, and they said—" Here she became much confused, and pretended to be fully occupied with the folds of her mistress's dress.

Miss Arthur looked down upon her sharply, and asked: "What did they say?"

Céline stammered: "Oh, it was only gossip, mademoiselle; nothing worth repeating, I assure you."

The curiosity and jealousy of the spinster were fully aroused. "Don't attempt any subterfuges, Céline," she said, in her loftiest tone. "I desire to know what was said of my—Mr. Percy"

The girl arose to her feet, and with much apparent reluctance, replied:

"They said, mademoiselle—of course, it was only gossip—that he was very much of a fortune-hunter, and that he was engaged to some woman much older than himself, who was immensely rich."

Miss Arthur sat down and looked hard at her maid. "How do you know that Mr. Percy is that man?"

"Oh! I don't know, my lady—mademoiselle. I only said that I thought I had seen him in Baltimore; the Mr. Percy they used to talk of there, must have been another."

Miss Arthur looked like an ancient Sphinx. "Do you think that Mr. Percy is that man?" she asked.

"*Merci!* my lady, how can I tell that? It might have been he; and the old woman there might have disappointed him, you know," artlessly.

Miss Arthur was literally speechless with rage. Without replying, she rose and swept into the adjoining room, closing the door behind her with a bang.

Céline smiled comfortably, and went to minister unto Cora, to whom she confided her belief that Miss Arthur was dissatisfied with her, and meant to discharge her. "And only think, madame," she said plaintively, "it is all because, in an ungarded moment, I compard her to an old woman. It is so hard to remember, always, that you must not tell an old woman she is not young."

And Cora laughed immoderately, for she much enjoyed her sister-in-law's discomfiture.

But Miss Arthur did not dismiss the matter from her mind, when she banged the door upon Céline. Angry as she had been with that damsel, it was not anger alone that moved her. Jealousy was at work, and suspicion.

That evening, sitting beside her lover, she said to him, carelessly: "By the way, Edward, were you ever in Baltimore?"

The gentleman stroked his bronde whiskers, and smiled languidly as he answered: "In Baltimore? Oh, yes; I think there are few cities I have not visited." And then something in the face of Miss Arthur made him inquire, with a slight acceleration of speech: "But why do you ask?"

Miss Arthur considered for a moment, and replied: "My maid, Céline, thinks that she has seen you there."

She was watching him keenly, and fancied that he looked just a trifle annoyed, even when he smiled lazily at her, saying: "Indeed! And when is your maid supposed to have seen me there?"

"I don't know when,"—Miss Arthur was beginning to feel injured; "I suppose you are well known in society there?"

He smiled and still caressed his chin. "So so," he said, indifferently.

"Edward!"—the spinster could not suppress the question that was heavy on her mind—"were you ever engaged to a lady in Baltimore."

He turned his blue eyes upon her in mild surprise. "Never,' he said nonchalantly.

She looked somewhat relieved, but still anxious, and the man, after eyeing her for a moment, placing one hand firmly upon her own, said, in a tone that was half caress, half command.

"Ellen you have been listening to gossip about me. Now, let me hear the whole story, for I see it has troubled you, and I will not have that."

She, glad to unburden her mind, told him what Céline said. Perhaps Céline had counted upon this, and was making, of the unconscious Mr. Percy, a tool that should serve her in just the way that he did. At all events, while he listened to the spinster, he assured himself that if the French maid were not, for some reason, an enemy, she was certainly a meddler, and that she must quit Miss Arthur's service.

He said nothing to this end that evening. But he fully satisfied Miss Arthur that he was not the person referred to by the girl. And to guard against further inquiries or accidents, he told her of several men of the name of Percy, who were much in society, and might be, any one of them, the man in question.

And his *fiance* was calmed and happy once more.

She was as clay in the potter's hands, and Mr. Percy found it an easy matter to convince her, a few days later, that her invaluable maid was not the proper per-

son to have about her. Accordingly, one fine morning, Céline was informed, in the spinster's loftiest manner, that her services were no longer desired, and a month's wages were tendered her, with the assurance that Miss Arthur "had not been blind to her sly ways, and trickery, and that she had only retained her until she could suit herself better."

Céline took her *congé* in demure, silence, and sought Mrs. Arthur forthwith. Cora was really glad that she could at last command the girl, for many reasons, and they quickly came to an understanding.

Great was the surprise and inward wrath of the spinster when, within ten minutes from the time Céline had left her presence, a maid without a mistress, she appeared again before her, and laying upon the dressing case the month's wages she had received in lieu of a warning, said:

"Mademoiselle will receive back the month's wages, as I have not been in the least a loser by her dismissal. I enter the service of madame immediately."

And then Céline had smiled blandly, bowed, and taken her departure, leaving the spinster to wonder how on earth she should manage her hair-dressing, and to wish that Edward had not insisted upon setting the girl adrift until a substitute had been found.

The fact that the girl was retained in the house annoyed Mr. Percy not a little. But it did not surprise him that Cora should wish to keep her. He had long before made the discovery that the sisters-in-law were not more fond of each other than was essential to the comfort of both.

Céline had been but two days in the service of her new mistress when that lady found herself too ill to be dressed for breakfast, even in her own room, and she kept her bed all day.

John Arthur, in some alarm, had declared his intention of calling a physician. But Cora objected so strongly that he had refrained. Before evening came, however, Céline sought him, as he was sitting in what he chose to call his "study," and said:

"Pardon my intrusion, monsieur, but I am distressed about madame. This afternoon she is not so well, and surely she should have some medicine."

The old man wrinkled his brows in perplexity, as he replied: "Yes, yes, girl; but she won't let me call a doctor."

Céline sighed, and moving a step nearer, murmured: "Monsieur, I will venture to repeat what madame but now said to me, if I may."

He signed her to proceed.

"Madame said that a stranger would only make her worse; that she would distrust anyone she did not know; but that if her dear old physician, who had attended her always in sickness, could see her, she would be glad. Alas! he was in New York, and she did not like to ask that he might be sent for. It would seem to you childish."

Of course this speech had been made at Cora's instigation, but it had the desired effect. John Arthur bounded up, and bade Céline precede him to his wife's chamber; and the result of his visit was what the invalid had intended it to be. She was so pretty, and so pathetic, and so very ill! Céline declared that she was growing more fevered every moment, and as for her pulse, it was like a trip-hammer.

John Arthur had an unutterable fear of illness, and after trying in vain to persuade Cora to see one of the village doctors, whom, he declared, were very good ones, he announced his intention to telegraph to the city for the doctor who had been her adviser in earlier days.

And to this Cora reluctantly consented. "It seems foolish," she said, plaintively, "and yet I don't think I *ought* to refuse to send for Doctor Le Guise. I feel as if I were really about to be very ill, hard as I have tried to fight off the weakness that is coming over me."

"And madame is so flushed, and wanders so in her sleep,"—this, of course, from Céline.

John Arthur arose from the side of the couch with considerable alacrity, saying

"I will telegraph at once. What is the address?"

Cora lay back among her pillows, with closed eyes, and made no sign that she heard. He spoke again, and the eyes unclosed slowly, and she said, with slow languor:

"Send to my brother; he will find him." Then closing her eyes, she murmured, "I want to sleep now."

Céline turned toward him an awe-struck countenance and motioned him to be silent. He tip-toed from the room, thoroughly frightened and nervous, and sent a message to Lucian Davlin forthwith.

When he was safely away, Cora awoke from her nap, and desired Céline to let in more light. This done, she propped herself among her pillows, and taking from underneath one of them a novel, bade her maid tell everybody that she was not to be disturbed, while she read and looked more comfortable than ill.

Towards evening, John Arthur looked in, or rather tried to look in, upon his wife. But Céline assured him that her mistress was sleeping fitfully and seemed much disturbed and agitated at the slightest sound, so his alarm grew and increased.

When the evening train came he hoped almost against reason that it would bring the now eagerly looked for Dr. Le Guise.

But no one came. Later, however, a telegram from Lucian arrived, which read as follows:

Doctor can't get off to-night. Will be down by morning train.

D——.

In the morning, Cora was much worse. She did not recognise her husband, and called Miss Arthur, Lady Mallory, which made a great impression upon that spinster.

Céline, who seemed to know just what to do, turned them both out, which did not displease either greatly, as the brother and sister were equally afraid of contagion, and were nervous in a sick-room.

At length the doctor arrived, and with him Lucian Davlin, the latter looking very grave and anxious, the former looking very grave and wise.

Céline was summoned to prepare the patient for the coming of the physician. When this had been done, and the wise man arose to go to his patient, John Arthur and Lucian would have followed him. But he waved them back, saying: "Not now, gentlemen, if you please; let me examine my patient first. That is always safest and wisest."

So the three, Lucian, Arthur, and his sister, sat in solemn silence awaiting the verdict of the doctor from Europe. At last he came, and the gravity of his face was something to marvel at. Advancing toward Mr. Arthur, the doctor seemed to be looking him through and through as he asked:

"Will you tell me how lately you have been in your wife's room."

John Arthur answered him with pallid lips. "We were there this morning, my sister and I."

The doctor turned toward Miss Arthur, looking, if possible, more serious than ever.

"I am sorry, very sorry," he said, "And I hope you have incurred no risks. But it is my duty to tell you that Mrs. Arthur is attacked with a fever of a most malignant and contagious type, and you have certainly been exposed."

Mr. Arthur turned the colour of chalk and dropped into the nearest chair. Miss Arthur, who could not change her colour, shrieked and fell upon the sofa. Lucian groaned after the most approved fashion. And the man of medicine continued:

"Above all things, don't agitate yourselves; be calm. I would advise you to retire to your own rooms, and remain there for the present. I will immediately prepare some powders, which you will take hourly. We will begin in time, and hope that you may both escape the contagion."

Then he turned to Mr. Davlin. "My dear boy, you had better go back to the city; at least go away from the house. This is no place for you."

But Lucian shook his head, and said that he would not leave while his sister was in danger.

The following morning Dr. Le Guise presented himself at the door of Miss Arthur's dressing-room. After making many inquiries, such as doctors are wont to terrify patients with, he pronounced upon the case: She had thus far escaped contagion. But her system was not over strong; in fact, was extremely delicate. If there was any place near at hand, suited to a lady like herself, his advice was to go there without delay. She was not rugged enough to risk remaining where she was.

Before sunset, Miss Arthur was quartered at the Bellair inn. She had dispatched Mr. Percy a note the day before, bidding him delay his visit. Now she was under the same roof with him, greatly to her delight, and his disgust.

John Arthur had not fared so well at the hands of the learned physician. He had swallowed his powders faithfully and hopefully, but the morning found him languid and dismal, with aching brain and nauseated stomach.

The doctor shook his head, and bade him prepare for a slight attack of the fever. It promised to be very slight, but he must keep his room, for a few days at least, and attend to his medicine and his diet.

And so the drama had commenced in earnest.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STARTLING EPISODE.

CLAIRE KEITH had said truly that the woman across the way would prove interesting to her.

She grew more and more fond of watching for the tall form, with its trailing robes of black, its proudly-poised, heavily-veiled head, and slow, graceful movement. Sometimes she saw a white hand pull away the heavy curtains, and knew that the owner of the hand was looking out upon the street. But the face was always in shadow. She could not catch the slightest glimpse of it.

"She has strong reasons for not wishing to be seen and recognised; I wonder what they are?" Claire would soliloquize at such times.

Then she would chide herself for being so curious. But the fits of wondering grew stronger, until she came to feel an attraction that was more than mere curiosity; a sort of proprietorship, as it were, in the strange lady. She began to wish that she might know her, and at last, in a very unexpected manner, the wish was gratified.

Claire had returned from a grand ball, weary and somewhat bored. Disrobing with unusual haste, she sought her couch. She had supposed herself very sleepy, but no sooner was her head upon the pillow, than sleep abandoned her, and she tossed restlessly, and very wide awake.

Finding sleep impossible, and herself growing nervous, Claire at length arose. Throwing on a dressing-gown, she pushed a large chair to the window, and flinging herself in it, drew back the curtain. Glancing across the way, she was startled by a light shining out from the upper windows of the mysterious house. She had looked at that house when quitting her carriage, because to look had become a habit. But there had been no light then; not one glimmer. And now the entire upper floor was brilliantly illuminated.

Claire rubbed her eyes and looked again. Then, with a cry of alarm, she sprang to her feet and rang her bell violently.

From the roof of the house a single flame had shot up, and Claire realized the cause of that strange illumination. The upper floor was in flames!

She turned up the gas and commenced making a hurried toilet. By the time the sleepy servant appeared in answer to her ring, she was wrapping a worsted shawl about her head and shoulders, preparatory to going out.

"Rouse papa and the servants, James!"

she commanded, sharply. "Number two hundred is on fire! Go instantly!"

Giving the startled and bewildered James a push in the direction of her father's sleeping-room, she darted down the stairs. She unbolted and unchained the street door, and hurried straight across to number two hundred, where she rang peel after peal.

The tiny flame had grown a great one by this time, and almost simultaneously with her ring at the door, the hoarse fire-alarm bell roared out its warning.

It seemed an age to the girl before she heard bolts drawn back. Then the face of an elderly male servant peered cautiously out through a six-inch opening. In sharp, quick tones Claire told him that the roof was in flames. The statement seemed only to paralyze the man.

Claire gave the door an excited push and spoke to him again. But he never moved until a voice, that evidently belonged to the lady of the house, said: "What is it, Peter?"

Claire answered for him: "Madame, the roof of your house is in flames! Alarm your servants and make your escape!"

Through the doorway Claire saw a white hand laid on the man's shoulder, and suddenly he became galvanised into life.

Then the chain fell, and the door opened wide.

Claire and the mysterious lady were face to face.

By this time the people were moving in the street, and from the windows of Claire's home, lights were flashing.

The woman drew back at the sound of the first footstep, and seemed to hesitate, with a look of uneasiness upon her face. Instantly Claire spoke the thought that had been in her mind when she rang the bell: 'Madame, your house will soon be surrounded by strangers. Secure such valuables as are at hand and come with me across to my home. There you will be safe from intruders."

The lady raised her hand, and saying, simply, "Wait," hurried up the broad stairs.

Now all was confusion. Down the street came the rushing fire engines; servants ran about frantically, and people went tearing past Claire in the crazy desire to seize something and smash it on the paving stones, thereby convincing themselves that they were "helping at a fire." Regardless of these, Claire stood at her post like a little sentinel. Just as the first engine halted before the house, the mistress of all that doomed grandeur crossed its threshold for the last time. Then she turned to Claire, and the two hurried silently through the throng, and across the street. The door was fortunately ajar. The servants and Mr. Keith were all outside, so the girl and her companion had been unobserved.

Claire led the way straight to her own room. Ushering in her companion, she closed the door upon chance intruders, and turned to look at her. The stranger had appeared at the door in a dressing-gown of dark silk, and this she still wore, having thrown over it a long cloak, and wrapped about her head, so as to almost entirely conceal her features, a costly cashmere shawl. This she now removed, and revealed to the anxious gaze of Claire the face of a woman past the prime of life; a face that had never been handsome, but which bore unmistakable signs of refinement and culture in every feature. The eyes were large, dark-gray, and undeniably beautiful. The hair was wavy and abundant; once it had been black as midnight, but now it was plentifully streaked with gray. The face was thin and almost colourless. The hands were still beautiful, with long slender fingers and delicate veining; the very *beau ideal* of aristocratic hands.

This much Claire saw almost at a glance. Then the lady said, in a low, sweet voice that was in perfect unison with the hands and eyes and general bearing:

"I cannot tell you, dear young lady, how much I thank you for your courage and

hospitality. I could not have endured the going out upon the street in that throng."

Claire laughed softly, and said, with characteristic frankness: "I guessed that, madame, for I must confess to having, on more than one occasion, seen that you do not desire observation."

The stranger looked at her with evident admiration. "You were kinder and more thoughtful for a stranger than I have found most of our sex, Miss——; I beg your pardon; I am so much of a hermit that I don't even know your name."

"My name is Keith, Claire Keith."

Then the girl crossed to the window and looked over at the burning building, while the stranger sank wearily into a chair.

"Your house is going fast, madame. I fear nothing can be saved," said Claire. "The upper floor is already gone."

The stranger smiled slightly, but never so much as glanced out at her disappearing home.

"I hope my landlord is well insured," she said. "As for me, I have my chiefest valuables here," drawing from underneath the cloak, which she had partially thrown off, a small casket, and a morocco case that evidently contained papers. "I keep these always near me; as for the rest, there is nothing lost that money cannot replace."

Claire looked a trifle surprised at her indifference to the destruction of her elegant furniture, but made no answer. And the stranger fell into thoughtful silence.

A rap sounded on the door, and a gentle voice outside said: "Claire, dear, are you there?"

The girl turned upon the stranger a look of embarrassed inquiry. "That is mamma," she said.

The lady smiled half sadly at her evident perturbation, and replied, with a touch of dignity in her tone, "Admit your mother, my dear. I was about to ask for her."

Claire drew a sigh of relief and opened the door.

"My child," began Mrs. Keith, as she hurriedly entered the room, "James tells me that you ——"

Here she broke off as her eyes fell upon the stranger, and Claire hastened to say. "Mamma, this is the lady whose house is burning. I ran over there as soon as I saw the first flame and asked her to come here."

Mrs. Keith was not only a lady, but a woman of good sense, and she turned courteously toward the intruder, saying "You did quite right, my dear. I trust you have not been too seriously a loser by this misfortune, madame."

The lady had risen. Now she stepped forward and said, in her unmistakably high-bred tones, "I have suffered no material injury, I assure you. And your daughter has done me a great kindness. I was about to ask if I might see you, as I felt that it was to you, as the mistress of this house, that I owed some explanation regarding myself, before accepting further hospitality from your daughter."

Mrs. Keith bowed gravely, and the stranger continued:

"My name is Mrs Ralston. I have lived for nearly ten years a secluded life, having been an invalid. Messrs. Allyne & Clive are my bankers, and have been for years. Mr. Allyne is an old family friend. If you will ask your husband to call upon him, you will feel assured that I am not a mysterious adventuress."

Mrs. Ralston smiled slightly, and Mrs. Keith smiled in return as she said, cordially: "Your face and manner assure me of that, Mrs. Ralston. And now will you not permit me to show you a room where you can rest a little, for it is almost morning, and your night's repose has been sadly disturbed."

"I must accept your hospitality, Mrs. Keith, and ask to be allowed to intrude upon you until I can communicate with Mr. Allyne, and he can find me a suitable place of residence."

"Don't let that trouble you, pray. We shall be happy to have you remain our

guest," and Mrs. Keith turned to leave the room.

Mrs. Ralston held out her hand to Claire, and that impulsive young lady clasped it in both her own, as they bade each other good-night. And so the mysterious lady was actually under the same roof with the girl who had been so much interested in her and her possible history.

Mr. Allyne was well known to Mr. Keith, and a man whom he highly esteemed. On the following day, at the request of Mrs. Ralston, he called at the banking house of Allyne and Clive.

On learning that Mrs. Ralston was the guest of his brother banker, and of the demolition of her house, Mr. Allyne was doubly surprised. And his statement concerning the lady was not only satisfactory but highly gratifying. She had been left an orphan in her girlhood, and was from one of the oldest and proudest of Virginia's old and proud families. She had now no very near relatives, and having separated from a worthless husband, had lived mostly in Europe. She had resumed her family name, and although the husband from whom she had withdrawn herself, had squandered nearly half her fortune, she was still a wealthy woman. He spoke in highest terms of praise of her mind and accomplishments, and assured Mr. Keith that she was not only a woman of unusual refinement and culture, but one also of loftiest principles and purest Christianity. If it were not that it would be the very place where this worthless husband would be likeliest to find her, he would not allow her to occupy any home save his own. And, lastly, Mr. Allyne stated that if he, Mr. Keith, could prevail upon Mrs. Ralston to remain under his roof, he would do Mr. Allyne a great favour.

"For," concluded that gentleman, "she lives too secluded, and she is so well fitted for such society as that of your wife and daughter: she is a woman to grace any household."

Mr. Keith returned home and faithfully reported all that he had heard concerning their guest.

Claire had been very much in love with the grave, stately lady from the first, and after a morning's chat with her, Mrs. Keith was not far behind in admiration.

And the woman who had lived alone so much, found this cheery little family circle very pleasant, so when Claire and her mother begged her with much earnestness to remain with them, she did not refuse.

"I cannot resist the invitation which I feel to be so sincere," she said. "I will remain with you for a time, at least, but I am too much of a hermit to tarry long where there is such a magnet as this," turning to Claire.

And Claire laughingly declared that she would forswear society, and don a veil of any thickness, if only Mrs. Ralston would share her isolation.

So she stayed with them, and soon became as a dearly loved sister to Mrs. Keith: while between herself and Claire, an attachment, as unusual as it was strong, sprang into being. They drove together, read together, talked together by the hour, and never seemed weary of each other's society.

Enthusiastic Claire wrote to Olive and Madeline, giving glowing descriptions of her new found friend. But because of the events that were making Olive and Madeline doubly dear to her, and because she could not speak of them to a stranger, however loved and trusted, Claire said little to Mrs. Ralston of her sister or of the little heroine of Oakley.

CHAPTER XXX.

WAITING.

The expert who had been tracing out the goings and doings of Percy, made his report.

After it had been thoroughly reviewed by Clarence and Olive, they were forced to confess that they were not one whit the

wiser. The detective had found how and where Percy had squandered much of his fortune, but had brought to light absolutely nothing that could be of use to his employers. Aud so they abandoned the investigation in that direction.

But when the report of the Professor's case was sent in, they found more cause for congratulation. First, it had been discovered that the Professor had visited three different physicians, all of them bearing reputations not over spotless. Next he had made sundry purchases from two different chemists; and third, last and all important, he had been dogged to the bazaar of a dealer in theatrical wares, where he had purchased a wig, beard and other articles of disguise.

Two days had passed since the above discoveries was reported. Then the detective called upon Dr. Vaughan and informed him that Mr. Davlin and the Professor, the latter disguised with wig, beard and spectacles, had taken the early morning train that very day, and that he, the detective, had been lounging so near that he heard Davlin call for two tickets to Bellair.

And then they knew that the seige had begun.

Three days later, Olive received the following letter, which speaks for itself:

Oakley, Wednesday Evening.

DEAR OLIVE:—The engagement has opened in earnest.

Last evening, Mr. D. and *le Docteur*, between them, frightened the two maids out of the house. This morning I succeeded in scaring away the old housekeeper, which made a shortage in servants. Old Hagar happened along just then *by some chance*, and declared herself not at all afraid of contagion, so madame bade her brother employ her. The cook remains, as *monsieur* and *le Doctor* must eat. My meals are served in madame's dressing-room and shared by that lady.

Courage, my friend, our time is almost here. And I am yours till death, M——.

This letter was perused by Olive and Clarence with almost breathless eagerness and interest. And then they found themselves once more waiting eagerly for fresh tidings from the "seat of war," as Clarence termed it.

At last came a letter from Madeline that aroused them as the clarion stirs those arrayed for battle. It ran as follows, bearing neither date nor signature:

TO ARMS, MY FRIENDS!—If you were among the village gossips to-day this is what you would hear, for it is what is fast spreading itself through the town:

The lady up at the mansion has been very ill, but is now better. Her husband took the fever from her, and, being old and his constitution enfeebled by the dissipation of his earlier days, he came near dying. Now they hope that he will live, although the danger is not yet passed. But *if he does live* he will never be himself again. The fever has affected his brain, and he will be *hopelessly mad*.

That is what the villagers know.

What they do not know is, that Mr. D—— and the *doctor* have already fitted up two rooms in the most secluded part of the closed-up wing, and that the "insane" man will be removed to those rooms to-night.

One fact concerning *le Docteur*, your expert has failed to discover, is that at some time the man has made a study of medicine. This is only a theory of mine, not a discovery; but when I tell you what he did, I think that you both will agree with me. A few days ago the *doctor* walked down to the village one morning, and coolly presented himself at the door of Doctor G——'s office.

Doctor G—— is the least popular and the least skilful of the three physicians here, but of course the city man was not supposed to know that. He, the city doctor, informed Doctor G—— that although his employer had not desired it, as he had perfect confidence in the present treatment of Mr. A——, still it was always his practice to consult with another physician.

So he desired Doctor G—— to accompany him to O—— and see his patient; not that he had any doubts about the disease, but because, in case of a serious termination, it was always a consolation to the friends to know that every precaution had been taken. Doctor G—— came, to find the patient in a bedrugged stupor. He endorsed everything *le doc-*

tenr chose to say, and went away feeling much puffed-up because of having been called in to consult with a New York physician.

You see they are moving very carefully, and do not intend to have any doubts raised.

Miss A—— of course remains in the village, and receives reports daily concerning her brother, and her Knight is still at her elbow.

Henry has been here for a week, and does not dream of my identity.

Hagar and myself, between us, have managed to get possession of a specimen of every drug that has been administered to Mr. A——, also of the harmless nostrums that are dealt out to madame for appearance's sake.

There is but one thing more that I must accomplish, and that must be done to-night, if possible. If I succeed in this, two days more will see me *en route* for the city. If I fail—then I must remain here, if I can, and try again. In any case, I must make my new move within the week. So look out for the chrysalis; it remains for you to develop it into the butterfly.

This letter chanced to arrive during one of Doctor Vaughan's afternoon visits, and Olive read it aloud to him, saying at the end, almost without taking breath.

"Something she must accomplish first. If she had secured the medicines, and they are safe not to run away in her absence, then what is it she means?"

Clarence shook his head, saying: "I have no idea. She speaks as if the thing, whatever it is, was attended with some risk."

"And this explains Henry's absence," Olive said, tapping the letter in her lap. "No doubt he was summoned without any previous warning. Of course, he is a mere tool for his master. They will hardly dare let him see their game."

"Hardly; but if they were not using him to Madeline's satisfaction, she would have revealed herself to him."

"True."

"We are approaching a crisis now. If this new movement fails—but I hardly think it will."

Olive looked up in alarm. "Oh, don't suggest failure," she exclaimed. "She *must* succeed. What will become of poor Philip if she does not?"

Clarence lifted his face reverently. "I believe that the Power above us, who permits evil to be because only from pain and sorrow comes purification, has not permitted the life of this beautiful young girl to be darkened in vain. Out of her wrongs, and her sorrows, and her humiliation, He will allow her own hands to shape not only a strong, true, earnest womanhood for herself, but the weapons which shall deliver the innocent, and bring the guilty to justice."

And Olive felt comforted, and her hope took new wings.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MR. PERCY SHAKES HIMSELF.

It was noontide at Oakley, and a December sun was shining coldly in at the window of Mrs. Cora Arthur's dressing-room. Within that cozy room, however, all was warmth and brightness. A cheerful fire was blazing and crackling in the grate. Sitting before the fire, wrapped in a becoming dressing-gown of white cashmere, was Cora herself, looking a trifle annoyed, but remarkably well withal. Wonderfully well, considering how very ill she had been.

Lounging near her, his feet lazily outstretched toward the fire, was Lucian Davlin.

"What did you write to Percy?" he inquired, consulting his watch.

"Just what you told me; that I had something of importance to communicate, and desired him to call to-day at two," replied Cora.

"But—aren't you looking a little two well for a lady who has been so desperately ill? It won't do to arouse his suspicions, you know."

Cora crossed to her dressing-case, went carefully over her face with a puff-ball, and

did some very artistic tracing in India ink under and over each eye. Then she turned toward him triumphantly. "There!" she exclaimed, "now I shall draw the curtains," suiting the action of the word, "and then, when I lie on this couch, my face will be entirely in the shadow, while from the further window there will come enough light to enable him to recognize you."

At this moment a rap was heard at the door. Cora threw herself upon the invalid's couch, and lay back among the pillows. When she had settled herself to her satisfaction, Mr. Davlin opened the door, admitting Céline Leroque.

"Monsieur Percy is below, madame," said the girl, glancing sharply at the form in the darkened corner.

"Come and draw these coverings over me, Céline, and then go and bring him up," replied Cora.

Then she glanced at Lucian, who said, carelessly: "Well, my dear, I will go down to the library."

Céline adjusted the wraps and pillows and then went out, closely followed by Lucian. She was not aware that Mr. Percy was expected, the message having been sent by Henry. And she was not a little anxious to know the nature of the interview that was about to be held.

Mr. Percy, conducted to Cora's door by Céline, entered the room with his usual lazy grace, and approached the recumbent figure in the darkened corner, saying, in a tone of hypocritical solicitude:

"Madame, I trust you are not overtaxing your strength in thus kindly granting me an interview."

He knew so well how to assume the manner best calculated to throw her off her guard and into a rage.

But Cora, understanding his tactics, and her own failing, was prepared for him. In tones as smooth as his own she answered:

"You are very good, and I find my strength returning quite rapidly. In fact," and here a double meaning was apparent, as she intended it should be, "I think I shall soon be *stronger* than before my illness."

There was silence for a moment. Evidently Mr. Percy was not inclined to help her to put into words whatever she had in her mind.

"I sent for you," she continued, "because I have something to say before you meet with a person who, as you are likely to remain one of this pleasant family, you must of necessity, and for policy's sake, meet with the outward forms of politeness." Here she paused as if from exhaustion, and he, lifting his fine eyebrows slightly kept silence still.

Cora, beginning to find her part irksome, hurried to its conclusion. "You have heard, no doubt, of the presence of my brother in this house. I sent for you that you might meet him, and I desired my maid to show you to this room first, that I might venture a word of warning and advice. My brother is not the stranger that you evidently imagine him. Beyond the fact that you and I were once married, that I of my own will forsook you, and the reason, or part of the reason for so doing, he knows little of our affairs. For my sake he will make no use of that knowledge. But I think it best that you understand each other. Will you please ring that bell?"

He obeyed her, looking much mystified and somewhat apprehensive. "Céline appeared promptly, and disappeared again in answer to Cora's command:

"Show my brother here, Céline."

When the door opened, he turned slowly and met the cool gaze of—Lucian Davlin!

That personage approached the invalid, saying: "You sent for me to introduce me to this gentleman, I suppose, Cora?"

Mr. Percy arose slowly, and the two confronted each other, whilst Cora nodded her head, as if unable to answer his words.

As Percy advanced the light from the one window that had been left unshrouded fell full upon the two men, who gazed upon each other with the utmost *sang froid*

Two handsomer scoundrels never stood at bay. And while the dark face expressed haughty insolence, the blonde features looked as if, after all, the occasion called for nothing more fatiguing than a stare of indolent surprise.

Cora's voice broke the silence: "Mr. Davlin is my brother, Mr. Percy. Please stop staring at each other, gentlemen, and come to some sort of an understanding."

"Really, this is a most agreeable surprise," drawled Percy, looking from one to the other with perfect coolness.

"And quite dramatic in effect," sneered Davlin, flinging himself into a chair. "Sit down, Percy, one may as well be comfortable. How's the fair spinster today?"

Percy waived away the question, and resumed his seat and his languid attitude, saying: "Upon my word this *is* quite dramatic."

Davlin laughed, airily. "Even so. I hope the fact that this lady is my sister will explain some things to you more satisfactorily than they have hitherto been explained. And if so, we had better let bygones drop."

Percy turned his eyes away from the speaker, and let them rest upon the face of Cora. Again ignoring the remark addressed to him, he said, slowly: "I don't see any very strong family resemblance."

"I don't suppose you ever will," retorted Davlin, coolly.

"And I don't precisely see the object of this interview," Percy continued.

Davlin made a gesture of impatience, and said, sharply: "Hang it all man, the object is soon got at! It's a simple question and answer."

Percy brushed an imaginary particle of dust off his sleeve with the greatest care, and then lifted his eyes and said, interrogatively: "Well?"

"Will you have war or peace?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"The terms."

"Well!"

"Well?"

"What do you want?"

Percy examined his finger nails, attentively, as if looking for his next idea there. "To be let alone," he said, at last.

Davlin laughed. "And to let alone?"

"Of course."

"Then we won't waste words. Rely upon us to help, rather than hinder you. There's no use bringing up old scores. If you vote for an alliance of forces, very good."

Percy nodded, and then rising, said: "Well, if that is all, I will take my leave. No doubt quiet is best for Mrs. Arthur," bowing ironically. "By-the-by," meaningly, "when you find yourself in the village, Davlin, it might not be amiss to show yourself at the inn."

"Quite right," said Davlin, gravely. "Possibly I may look in upon you tomorrow."

Mr. Percy nodded; made a graceful gesture of adieu to Cora, who murmured inaudibly in reply; and the two men quitted her presence.

In a few moments Davlin returned to Cora, smiling and serene. "I told you we could easily manage him," he said. "He won't trouble himself to go to war, save in his own defence. You did the invalid beautifully, Co., and I feel quite satisfied with the present state of things."

But Mr. Percy had not looked and listened for nothing. He went straight to his room, and shutting himself in, began to think diligently. Finally he summed up his case on his fingers as follows:

"First, are they brother and sister? I don't believe it. Second, taking it for granted they are not, what is their game? If the old man dies, and if I can ferret out the mystery, for I believe there is one, *who knows but that two fortunes may come into my hands?* I must watch them, and to do that, Ellen must go back to Oakley, and they must invite me to be their guest!"

Mr. Percy arose and shook himself, mentally and physically.

But alas for Céline! She had heard al-

most every word of the interview, through the keyhole of a door leading into an adjoining room, and it had told her nothing, save that there was to be peace between the two men, and that there had been, perhaps, war.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SILKEN BELT.

Mr. Percy and Miss Arthur were openly engaged now, and were anxiously waiting for the recovery of the sick at Oakley, in order to celebrate their marriage.

The spinster was in a frame of mind to grant almost any favour to her lover to-night. And when at last she, herself, led up to the subject she wished to broach, he foresaw an easy victory.

"Oh, Edward," with a very dramatic shudder, "you cannot think how I dread to-morrow's ordeal, the visit to my brother! Suppose poor John were to rave at me—me, his own sister!"

He took the hand that was quite as large as his own, and caressed it reassuringly. "I don't think there is the slightest danger, Ellen, dear, but I am convinced I must attend you to-morrow. I shall feel better to be with you."

"Oh, Edward!" sighed the maiden, enraptured at this declaration of tenderness, "you are so careful of me."

He smiled and still caressed her hand, saying: "Listen, darling," drawing her nearer to him, "I don't like to have you here; it is not a fit place for you. And I find that remarks are being made. This I cannot endure. Besides, I do not think it right for you or me to leave your brother so entirely at the mercy of—Mrs. Arthur. Promise me that you will consult a physician to-morrow, and as soon as the danger of contagion is past, you will go back."

"But I can't bear to leave *you*, Edward."

"And you shall not. I will come to Oakley, too."

"You? Oh, how nice! Have they asked you to come?"

"I saw Mrs. Arthur's brother to-day and we settled that."

"Oh, *did* you? Then you are good friends again?"

He turned upon her a look of inquiry. "Again?"

"Yes; Cora told me not to speak of Mr Davlin to you, as you were not good friends, and it might make you less free to come to the house."

Mr. Percy's eyebrows went up perceptibly. "Mrs. Arthur is very thoughtful; but she was mistaken; our little misunderstanding has not made us serious enemies."

"Oh, how nice!" rapturously.

"*Very* nice," dryly. "Now you will be a good girl and go back soon?"

"I don't think Cora will be over anxious to have me come back," she said, looking like a meditative cat-bird. "I know she kept that Céline in the house to spite me."

"I can readily understand how she might be jealous of you, dear. Perhaps she fears your influence over your brother. At any rate, your duty lies there. When it is time to do so, don't consult her or anyone; take possession of your former apartments, and stand by your brother in his hour of need."

Miss Arthur promised to comply with her lover's request, and he managed at last to escape from her, and seek the repose which he preferred to such society.

All this time John Arthur was a prisoner in the west wing. He was attended by the doctor sometimes, by Céline occasionally, and by Henry almost constantly since the arrival of that sable individual.

Lucian Davlin, having no taste for the work, kept aloof as much as possible. Himself and Dr. Le Guise, as he called his confederate, had laboured hard and, with the assistance of old Hagar, had put the rooms in proper condition for the occupancy of a lunatic. And a lunatic John Arthur certainly was. Once before his removal, and once since, he had been seized with a paroxysm of undeniable insanity.

John Arthur had been, and still was, the dupe of his supposed brother-in-law and Dr. Le Guise. We have all heard of natures that can be frightened into sickness, almost into dying, of an imaginary disease. John Arthur's was one of these. And, with a little aid from Dr. Le Guise, he had been really quite ill.

Henry had been constituted his keeper, a position which he filled with reluctance, and there was a fair prospect that sooner or later he would break into open mutiny. Although he could not guess at the nature of the game his master was playing, yet he felt assured that it was something desperate, if not dangerous."

He had promised "his young lady," as he called Madeline, to remain in Mr. Davlin's service until she bade him withdraw, and but for this would hardly have submitted to remain John Arthur's keeper on any terms. Henry had a certain pride of his own, and that pride was in revolt against this new servitude.

He had not met Cora here, and had no idea that she was an inmate of the house.

Dr. Le Guise had relieved Henry on the morning of the day that Miss Arthur ventured, for the first time since her flight, within the walls of Oakley manor, escorted by Mr. Percy. He had detected some signs of fever, although Mr. Arthur declared himself feeling better, and administered a powder to check it.

Soon the patient began to show signs of increasing restlessness, and by the time Henry appeared to announce that Miss Arthur desired an interview with Dr. Le Guise, he began to wrangle with his physician and gave expression of various vagaries.

Consigning his charge to Henry, with the remark that he "must watch him close, and not let him get hold of anything," Dr. Le Guise hurried down to the drawing-room.

The doctor listened to Miss Arthur attentively, while she made known her desire to return to the manor if the danger of contagion was at an end. Then he replied, hurriedly:

"Quite right; quite admirable. But if you will take my advice, I should say, don't come just yet. There will be no danger to you, in going to your unfortunate brother for just a few moments—a very few—and then going straight out of the house into a purer atmosphere. But to remain here now, to breath this air just yet—my dear lady, I could not encourage that; the danger would be too great."

And then he led the way straight in to John Arthur's presence, explaining as they went that the cause of his removal from his own rooms was to escape the fever impregnations still clinging there.

John Arthur was sitting in the middle of his bed, beating his pillows wildly, and imploring Henry, between shrieks of laughter to come and kiss him, evidently mistaking him for some blooming damsel. As the damsel declined to come, the lunatic became furious, and hurled the pillows, and afterwards his night cap, at him, with blazing eyes and cat-like agility. This done, he began to rock himself to and fro, and shout out the words of some old song to an improvised tune that was all on one note.

Dr. Le Guise turned to Mr. Percy whispering: "You see; that's the way he goes on, only worse at times."

Mr. Percy turned away. The fair spinster who had been clinging to him in a paroxysm of terror, attempted to faint, but remembering her complexion, thought better of it and contented herself with being half led, half carried out, in a "walking swoon." And both she and Mr. Percy felt there was no longer room to doubt the insanity of her brother.

Having seen then depart, Dr. Le Guise sought out Mr. Davlin. Finding him in Cora's room, he entered and informed the pair of the desire Miss Arthur had manifested to come back to her brother's roof and of his mode of putting off the evil day of her return.

"Humph!" ejaculated Davlin, "wh'

does it mean? I saw Percy in the village this morning, and he told me quite plainly that he desired an invitation to quarter himself upon us."

"And what did you say?" gasped Cora.

"Told him to come, of course, as soon as it was safe to do so."

"Well!" said Cora, dryly, "I don't think it will be very safe for either of them to come just at present."

"Oh, well," said the doctor, cheerfully, "we have got seven long days to settle about that. And if they insist upon coming, and *then catch the fever*, they musn't blame me."

And Dr. Le Guise looked as if he had perpetrated a good joke.

John Arthur's insanity was as short-lived as it was violent. He lay for the rest of the day quiet and half stupefied. When night came on, he sank into a heavy slumber.

At twelve o'clock that night, all was quiet in and about the manor.

Cora Arthur was sleeping soundly, dreamlessly, as such women do sleep. In the room adjoining hers, Céline Leroque sat, broad awake, and listening intently. At last, satisfied that her mistress was sleeping, Céline arose and stole softly into the room where she lay.

Softly, softly, she approached the couch, passing through a river of moonlight that poured in at the broad windows. Then she drew from a pocket, something wrapped in a handkerchief.

Noiselessly, swiftly, she moved, and then the handkerchief, shaken free from the something within, was laid upon the face of the sleeper, while the odour of chloroform filled the room.

Nimbly her fingers moved, pulling away the coverings, and then the clothing from the unconscious body. It is done in a moment. With a smothered exclamation of triumph, she draws away a *silken belt*, and removing the handkerchief, glides noiselessly from the room.

She steals on to her own room in the west wing. Here she locks the door and, striking a light, hurriedly rips the silken band with a tiny penknife, and draws from thence two papers.

One glance suffices. Replacing the papers, she binds the belt about her own body, and then envelopes herself in a huge waterproof, with swift, nervous fingers.

And now, for the second time, this girl is fleeing away from Oakley. Out into the night that is illuminated now by a faint, faint moon; through the bare, leafless, chilly woods, and down the path that crosses the railway track not far from the little station. Once more she follows the iron rails; once more she lingers in the shadows, until the train thunders np; the night train for New York. Then she springs on board.

For the second time, Madeline Payne is fleeing away from Oakley and all that it contains; fleeing cityward to begin, with the morrow, a new task, and a new chapter in her existance.

But no lover is beside her now; for that love is dead in her heart. And no Clarence breathes in her ear a warning, for now it is not needed. Since that first June flitting, she has learned the world and its wisdom, good and evil.

And the cloud that Hagar saw on that June night, hangs dark over the house of Oakley.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

An irate pair were seated at breakfast the morning after Céline's flitting. And while they ate little, they talked much and earnestly, sometimes angrily. They had arrived at the conclusion, which, although erroneous, had been foreseen by the astute Céline, namely: That the robbery had been committed at the instigation of Mr. Percy, and that Céline had been bought over and used by him as a tool.

It was evident that something must be done, and that quickly.

While these papers were in the hands of Percy, as undoubtedly they were at that

moment, it were best to keep that gentleman as much as possible under their own eye.

Yesterday, it had seemed desirable that Miss Arthur and her *fiance* should be kept out of the house of Oakley. To-day, they agreed that the quicker the pair took up their abode beneath its hospitable roof, the sooner they, Mr. Davlin and his accomplice, would breathe freely. If they could get the two in the same house with themselves, they might yet outwit Mr. Percy—with the aid of their friend and ally, the sham doctor, if in no other way. Meantime they would not make the robbery known; or rather, they would inform the servants and all others whom it seemed desirable to enlighten, that the girl Céline, had possessed herself of certain jewels and of Mrs. Arthur's purse, and fled with her spoils.

Accordingly, Hagar was summoned and told of the base ingratitude of the French maid. Whereupon she was much astonished, and ventilated her opinions of French folk in general, and that one in particular. Through Hagar, the other servants, now few in number, were informed of the defalcation, and the extent of damage done by Miss Céline Leroque. Then the kitchen cabinet held a session forthwith, and settled the fate of their departed contemporary, being ably assisted by Hagar.

The professor was made no wiser than were the rest of the tools who served the plotters. But he was somewhat surprised upon being desired, by Mr. Davlin, to equip himself for a walk, the object of which was to allay the alarm of Miss Arthur and her friend, and invite them to the manor forthwith. Said invitations were to be followed up with the doctor's assurance that, having made a more minute examination, he was fully satisfied that there was no fear of contagion from Mrs. Arthur, and but little from her husband; none in fact, unless they desired to be much in his room.

The worthy pair set out for the village, and were so fortunate as to meet Mr. Percy on the very threshold of the inn. Having exchanged greetings and cigars, and having discussed the weather and various other interesting topics, the gentlemen sent up their compliments to Miss Arthur.

They were soon admitted into the presence of that lady, where more skirmishing was done, during which Dr. Le Guise unburdened himself, as per programme, and then Mr. Davlin fired his first shot.

"By-the-by, Miss Arthur, you may congratulate yourself that you did not retain that impostor of a French maid longer in your service."

Lucian had purposely placed himself near the spinster, and where he could observe the face of Percy without seeming to do so. But that gentleman was glancing lazily out at the window, and his face was as expressionless as putty. Lucian uttered a mental, "Confound his *sang froid*," as he continued:

"She has robbed my sister of jewels and money to the tune of a couple of thousand, and has cut and run."

"Goodness gracious, Mr. Davlin!" shrieked the spinster.

But Percy only turned his head lazily, and elevated his eyebrows in mute comment.

"Yes," laughing lightly, "I suppose the hussy fancied that she had made a heavier haul still. My sister had about her person some papers, or rather *duplicates of papers that are deposited in a safer place.* The jade took these also, thinking, no doubt that they were of value or, perhaps, without examining them to see that they were worse than worthless to her."

"Oh, Mr. Davlin, what an artful creature! I was sure she was not quite to be trusted. But who would have supposed that she would dare——" gushed Miss Arthur.

"Oh, she is no doubt a professional; belongs to some city 'swell mob,' begging your pardon. But I shall run up to the city to-night, I think, and try and see if the detectives can't unearth her."

Still no sign from Percy; not so much as the quiver of an eyelid.

So Mr. Davlin came straight to the issue, thinking that surely Mr. Percy would betray something here; perhaps would refuse to come to Oakley. In such case, Lucian felt that he should be tempted to spring upon him and throttle him from sheer desperation.

But again he was mistaken, for no sooner was his invitation extended, than Mr. Percy accepted it with evident gratification, saying, in his easy drawl: "Shall be delighted to change my quarters. Anything must be an improvement upon this. And as your—ah, Dr. Le Guise—says there is positively no danger, Miss Arthur will of course be rejoiced to return to her proper place."

And of course Miss Arthur assented.

Before leaving, Mr. Davlin arranged that the carriage should come for Miss Arthur the next day, and that a porter should immediately transfer their luggage to Oakley.

"My faith," mused he, as he strode back to tell Cora of his mission; "but he carries it with a high hand. I didn't think there was so much real devil in him. He is playing a fine game, but I don't think he can dream that we suspect him. If we can deceive him in this, and get him into the house, we will be able to accomplish his downfall, I think."

Meantime, Edward Percy was viewing the matter from his own standpoint.

"Luck is running into my hand," he assured himself. "They are evidently a little bit afraid of me; there's nothing more awe-inspiring than a cool front, and I certainly carry that. Once at Oakley, it will be strange if I don't fathom their little mystery. If they are doing mischief there, I won't be behind in claiming the lion's share of the spoils."

According to arrangement, Miss Arthur and her lover were transferred to Oakley on the following day, and there the game of cross purposes went on.

Cora received Miss Arthur with much cordiality, averring that she had missed the society of "dear Ellen" more than she could tell, and declaring that now she should begin to get well in earnest.

Messrs. Davlin and Percy affected much friendliness, and watched each other furtively, day and night.

Dr. Le Guise reported an unfavourable change in his insane patient and forbade them, one and all, to enter his room.

Cora and Davlin protested against th doctor's cruel order, but in vain. Mr. Percy made no objections, but kept his eyes open. One evening, the second of his stay at the manor, he saw, while coming up the stairs with slippered feet, the form of Mr. Davlin as it disappeared around the angle leading to the west wing. Then Mr. Percy stole on until he stood at the door of the wing. Satisfying himself that Davlin was actually within the forbidden room, he waited for nothing further, but glided quietly back to his own door, looking as imperturbable as ever, and saying to himself:

"There is a mystery; and we, *rather I*, am not to see Mr. Arthur at present. Well, I don't want to see him; but *I hold the clue* to your little game, my fair second wife."

Lucian Davlin went to the city, but he did not set a detective on the track of Céline Leroque. He chose his man, one who had served him before, and set him about something quite different. Then he returned, feeling quite satisfied and confident of success.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A SLIGHT COMPLICATION.

And what of Céline, or Madeline, as we may call her once more?

She had said, when writing to Olive, that her stay in the city must be very brief. But even her strong will could not keep off the light attack of fever that was the result of fatigue and exposure to night breezes. And the morning following her arrival at the villa, found her unable to rise from her bed.

Dr. Vaughan was summoned in haste, and his verdict anxiously waited for. "It was a slight fever attack," he said, "but the wearied-out body must not be hurried. It must rest."

And he forbade Madeline to leave her room for a week at least, unless she wished to bring upon herself a return of her summer's illness.

Much to his surprise and gratification, Madeline did not rebel, but replied, philosophically: "I can't afford to take any risks now; I will be good. But you must watch my interests."

During the first day of her "imprisonment," as she laughingly called it, Clarence and Olive were put in possession of all the facts that had not already been communicated by letter.

Upon one thing they were all agreed, namely, that it would be wise for Clarence to make another journey to Bellair.

"They won't be able to accomplish much during the week that I must remain inactive," said Madeline. "But it will be safest to know just what they are about. Besides, I have reasons for thinking that Henry is growing dissatisfied, and it is to our interest to keep him where he is for the present. Had a suitable opportunity offered, I should have made him aware of my identity. But as it did not present itself, I left it with Hagar to inform him that he was serving me by remaining."

Dr. Vaughan prepared to visit Bellair on the second day after the arrival of Madeline. But almost at the moment of starting there came a summons from one of his patients, who was taken suddenly worse. Thinking to take a later train he hastened to the sick man; but the hour for the last train arrived and passed, and still he stood at the bedside, battling with death. So it transpired that nearly three days had elapsed since the flitting of Céline Leroque, when Dr. Vaughan entered the train that should deposit him at dusk in the village of Bellair.

It had been pre-arranged by Madeline and Hagar that, in case of any event which should delay the return of the former on the day appointed, the latter was to visit the post office and look for tidings through that medium. Madeline had been due at Oakley the day before, and so, of course, to-day Hagar would be in attendance at the office.

Dr. Vaughan had written, at the moment of quitting his office to visit his patient, a hasty supplement to Madeline's letter, stating that he was delayed one train, but not to give him up if he did not appear that evening. He would certainly come on the next day's train.

Clarence was somewhat fatigued as he entered the railway carriage, having spent the entire previous night at the bedside of his patient. He went forward to the smoking car, thinking to refresh himself with a weed.

Four men were engrossed in a game of cards not far from him. As they became more deeply interested, and their voices more distinct above the roar of the cars, something in the tones of one of the men caught his ear, reminding him of some voice he had sometime heard or known. The speaker sat with his back to the young man, and nothing of his countenance visible save the tips of two huge ears. These, too, had a familiar look.

Clarence arose and sauntered to the end of the car, in order to get a view of the face that he felt assured, was not unknown to him.

The man was absorbed in his game and never once glanced up. Our hero having taken a good look at the not very prepossessing face, returned to his seat. He had recognised the man. It was Jarvis, the detective who had been recently employed by him to shadow Lucian Davlin.

It was not a remarkable thing that Jarvis should leave the city on the same train with himself, but the circumstance, nevertheless, set Clarence thinking. Could it be possible that the man had found something to arouse his suspicions, and was he following up the clue on his own account?

Clarence felt an unaccountable desire to know where the detective was going. If he were going to Bellair, then he must be bought over. If he were going to Bellair, he, Clarence, must know it before the village was reached. It was hardly probable that the man's destination was identical with his own, but he had now determined to run no risks.

Throwing back his overcoat, and setting his hat a trifle on one side, Clarence sauntered up to the group of card players, assuming an appearance of interest in the game. As he paused beside them, Jarvis swept away the last trick of a closely-contested game, and then said, consulting his watch the while:

"There's for you! I've got just three-quarters of an hour to clean you out in, so come on."

Three quarters of an hour! The exact time it would take to run to Bellair.

Clarence shifted his position so as to put himself behind the two men seated opposite Jarvis. As he did so, the expert glanced up, encountering the eye of Dr. Vaughan.

"How are you?" said that young man, nonchalantly.

Jarvis shot him a keen glance of intelligence, and replied, in the same off-hand tone: "High, you bet!"

Jarvis was attired like a well-to-do farmer; and Clarence guessed, at a glance, that his three companions were strangers, two of them being commercial tourists, without a doubt, and the third, a ruddy-looking old gent, who might have been anything harmless. Taking his cue from the "make up" of the detective, Clarence, after giving him an expressive glance, said, easily: "Sold your stock?"

Jarvis cocked up one eye as he replied, while shuffling the cards: "Every horn!"

"Want to buy?"

Jarvis looked him straight in the eye. "Want to sell?"

"Yes, rather."

Jarvis dealt round with great precision, and then said: "All right, Cap. I'll talk with you when I get through this game."

Clarence nodded, and presently sauntered away. As soon as his back was turned, Jarvis jerked his thumb toward him, saying, confidentially:

"Young fellow; swell farmer; big stock-raiser." And then he plunged into the game with much enthusiasm.

Clarence resumed his seat, and, for a few moments, thought very earnestly. The words of the detective had confirmed his suspicion. He now felt assured that Jarvis was bound for Bellair, and if so he was, no doubt, in the employ of Lucian Davlin, for some unknown purpose. What that purpose was, he must know at any cost.

By the time his plans were fairly matured, he observed that the group of card-players was breaking up. In another moment, Jarvis lounged lazily along and threw himself down upon the seat beside him.

In little more than half-an-hour they would be due in Bellair, and what Clarence desired to say must be said quickly. Taking out his cigar-case, he offered the man a weed, which was accepted with alacrity, and while it was being lighted, Clarence said: "Are you especially busy now?"

"N-o; only so-so."

"Learned anything more in regard to my man?"

"Davlin?" interrogatively.

"Yes."

"No," puffing contentedly; we don't move in a case after it's paid off."

"I see," smiling; and then, making his first real venture: "Could you do some work for me to-morrow?"

Jarvis looked keenly at him, and Clarence hastened to say, with perfect, apparent, candour:

"The fact is I have been put back by a patient, and my own personal affairs have been neglected. So I have been unable to look you up at the office, in order to put a little matter into your hands. To-day I am

called away unexpectedly." Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, "How long will you be out of town?"

Jarvis shook his head. "Don't know."

"By Jove, what a pity. I'd rather have you than any other man, and I won't stand about money; but my work won't keep long."

The doctor's flattery and the detective's avarice combined, had the desired effect. Jarvis unbent, and became more communicative. "Fact is," he said, squaring about, "I don't know my lay just yet."

"No?" inquiringly: "Going far out?"

"No."

"Well," as if about to drop the conversation, "I'm sorry you can't do the job. It's big pay and success sure. The truth is," lowering his voice confidentially, "there are two parties beside myself interested, and both have plenty of money. It's a snug sum to the man who does our work."

The detective looked grave, and then became confidential in his turn.

"The fact is,"—he was fond of using "facts" when it was possible to lug one in—"I am sent out to a small town as a sub."

"A sub.?"

"Yes; substitute. You see, one of our men was detailed to do some work for a chap who came to the Agency from this little town. It was a case of record hunting. Well, the man went out last night all O. K.; he was a little on the sport when off duty, but a tip-top chap when at work. Well, he got into a gambling brawl, and this morning they brought him in, done up."

"Done up?"

"Yes; killed, you know."

"Oh!"

"And so, you see, I am ordered down here to take the instructions of my gentleman, in the place of my pard, who won't receive any more orders here below."

"Then you don't yet know precisely what is required of you?"

"No; I was packed off at half an hour's notice, and don't even know the name of my employer. I have my instructions and his address here," tapping his breast pocket. "I believe the party lives out of town, at some manor or other."

Clarence was thinking very fast. There was but one "Manor" in or near Bellair. He looked at his time-card; there was but one town between them and that village. Holding the card in his hand he said:

"Well, I will try and tell you what I want done; that is, if there is time—how soon do you leave the train?"

Jarvis now scented a fat job, and thinking only of getting the particulars of that replied, rather incautiously, as he consulted the time-card in the hand of Clarence.

"By goshen! it's only two stations off—Bellair."

"Oh! Bellair, eh?"

Jarvis nodded ruefully, and then asked: "Where do you land?"

Clarence smiled a little as he replied: "Wait until you hear my business, then you will know where I am going."

"All right; fire away."

And the expert settled himself into a listening attitude. "The truth is, Jarvis, I want you back on the old case."

"What, the gambler's?"

"Yes, Davlin; he is about at the end of his rope, and will, in a short time, be trying to quit the country. Did you ever see the woman who is his partner in iniquity? You heard considerable of her while looking up this business."

"Heard of her? I should think so. Never saw her, though."

"No matter; you may see her soon. You see, they are now at work upon a fine piece of rascality. She has actually married an old man, supposing him to be wealthy, and Davlin is figuring as her brother. In reality, the old man, their victim, holds only a life interest in the property. So you see, even if they succeed with the thing in hand, they won't make much. And the person who will inherit, after the old gentleman passes away, is aware of their real character and is ready

to spring upon them at the proper moment."

Jarvis gave a long, low whistle.

"Now, then, there is another crime—one that occurred some years ago, with which this man and woman are connected, and they are allowed to go free for a little time in order to complete the evidence in this second case."

Jarvis nodded sagely.

"So you see there will be double fees, and large ones. First, from the heir, and next, from the parties interested in the last case. The two are friends, in fact, and work together. Of course, I should expect to act according to the rules of your office, and I know that you are paid by your manager, but—if you can put me in possession of all the movements of Lucian Davlin for the next week, in addition to the salary paid you by your head officials, I will promise you one thousand dollars. If, later, you can supply the missing evidence, it shall be five thousand,"

Jarvis looked hastily behind him. Is he in this train?"

"No."

"Then where the dev——"

"Wait," interrupted Clarence. "I'll tell you where he is." But first you may attend to the business on which you came to Bellair. You may obey the instructions you shall receive to the letter. But I must know what it is you are bidden to do."

Jarvis knitted his brows and finally said, as if giving up a knotty problem, "Make things plainer; I am befogged."

"Plainly then," said Clarence, "you are going to Bellair; and," drawing out his pocket-book, "you are not retained as yet for this work?"

"No."

"Well," placing a one hundred dollar bill in his hand, "I retain you for my case, here and now, and you may accept the other fee if like."

"How?"

"Look at the address of your new client."

Jarvis took from his pocket a number of cards, shuffled them off deftly, and, selecting the right one at last, read slowly the name of his unseen employer. Then he glanced quickly up at Clarence, re-read his card, and leaning back upon the cushion, shook with silent laughter.

"Well, if you ain't the rummest one yet! And I'm your man! Why, bless my soul, you are a lawyer and detective all in one!"

Clarence smiled, but he knew this was the highest compliment that Jarvis was capable of. "Then I may depend upon you?" he asked.

"You bet!"

They were nearing the village of Bellair now, and Clarence, who did not intend to let Jarvis know too much concerning his movements, gave him some hasty instructions, and ended by asking: "When do you go back to the city to report?"

"By the next train. Davlin is expecting me, and I shall take his orders and then go back."

"Very well; I'll see you in town tomorrow. Now, as it won't do to risk the chance of being seen together, I will go into the other car." And Clarence sauntered away.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"THOU SHALT NOT SERVE TWO MASTERS" SET AT NAUGHT.

MEANWHILE, as they steamed into the village, which was the destination of both, Mr. Jarvis soliloquized, as he caressed his wallet pocket:

"I know who will butter my bread. Davlin is as slippery as an eel, and will end in trouble. Dr. Vaughan is a man of his word, and I don't need his bond. I'm sure of one thousand, if not of five. And I never was over fond of this gentleman gambler."

It may be remarked that Davlin was a man pretty well known by the police and detectives. A gambler riding the the top wave of success might have found more favour in the eyes of Jarvis. But he knew,

because of his previous investigations, that Davlin was not "flush" at that time.

Clarence kept carefully out of sight when the train reached the village. Springing lightly to the ground, on the opposite side from the platform, he walked swiftly away, unnoticed in the darkness. Once more he crossed the field and knocked at the door of Hagar's cottage, and this time it was Hager who admitted him.

Eagerly he listened, while the old woman told him how very fast Cora was recovering now; how they had got Miss Arthur and Percy back into the house; and how very careful both Cora and Lucian were to treat them politely. Madeline had not confided to Hagar the story of Olive, and the old woman knew no more of Edward Percy than that he was, as she termed it, "a handsome hypocrite."

Clarence questioned Hagar closely. Had they made any attempt to find the one who took the papers?

"No," Hagar replied; they had said that Céline Leroque had stolen money and jewels, but they had not said one word about any papers."

Last of all, she told him how, fearing that Henry was becoming too restive, and fearing, also, the effect of too much of the Professor's medicine upon the somewhat enfeebled system of the prisoner, she had made known to Henry the fact that he was working in the cause of his young lady. On learning this, and having it proved to his satisfaction, for he was at first inclined to be sceptical, he had been much delighted, and had since carried out the orders of Madeline as transmitted through Hagar.

Their conversation lasted a full hour, and then, having learned all that could be learned from that source, and having delivered all of the messages sent by Madeline, he bade the old woman a kind good-night, and retraced his steps across the field and back to the village.

When the night train halted at Bellair, Jarvis seated himself in the smoking-car, feeling quite self-satisfied. When the train moved on, he lighted a very black cigar and began to contemplate the situation.

"Well, how do we stand now?"

As the voice of Clarence Vaughan fell upon his ear, Jarvis bounded from his seat like an india rubber ball, and stared wildly at the young man who had dropped down into the seat beside him as if from the ceiling.

"Well, you are a rum one," said he, at last. Might I ask where you came from?"

"From the ladies,"

"Oh!" with the air of having made a discovery. "So you ride out of the city in a smoking-car for the purpose of riding back in the ladies' carriage?"

Clarence laughed again, settled himself comfortably in his seat and took out his cigar case. "Not exactly," proceeding to light a weed. "I am on pretty much the same business that you are, to-night." Then, taking a big puff, "I have been to Bellair, like yourself."

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes; how did your business prosper?"

Jarvis eyed him sharply. "Perhaps you know already."

"Perhaps I do. You have not got to look for stolen diamonds, have you?"

Jarvis laughed derisively.

"Or stolen money?" pursued Clarence.

Jarvis shrugged his shoulders.

"Or stolen—*papers?*"

Jarvis began to look foxy.

"Or a runaway young woman?"

Jarvis thought furiously for a few moments; then turning square upon his interlocutor, said, significantly: "So there are stolen papers?"

Clarence smiled, but said nothing.

"And," pursued Jarvis, "when one loses one's papers, say deeds, or a—marriage certificate, one naturally thinks of hunting the records for proofs that such papers existed."

"And that is your work?"

Jarvis nodded.

"Take you out of the city?"

Only a few miles."

Clarence reflected for a time, and then said: "You can do your work, but report all discoveries *to me*."

Jarvis assented, and they continued to talk of the matter in hand until the city was reached. Then, having made an appointment for the coming day, and agreed to let the work of shadowing the gambler or, rather, his business, remain a "private spec." to Jarvis, they separated.

Thoroughly wearied, Clarence sought his batchelor apartments and the repose he so much needed.

Early the next day he was up, and after paying a visit to his patient, he turned his steps, or the steps of his horse, in the direction of the villa.

He found Madeline sitting up, feeling much better, and looking altogether lovely. Drawing their chairs near together in front of the crackling grate fire, the three discussed the result of the journey to Bellair. Having first related the news imparted by Hagar, Dr. Vaughan turned to Madeline and asked:

"What is your theory, sister mine, in regard to this change at Oakley? Why have they turned about and taken up Miss Arthur and her *fiance* with such sudden affection. Have you guessed?"

The girl smiled up at him as she replied: "Certainly; have not you?"

"You incorrigible little lawyer! Yes, but give us yours first."

"Why," said Madeline with a light laugh, "I suppose they have been suspecting the wrong party. They think that I was an emissary of Mr. Percy's."

"Undoubtedly that is the truth," assented Clarence.

"And," added Madeline, "believing the documents in his possession, it is easy to understand that they prefer having the gentleman under the same roof with themselves."

"True; now, the question that interests us is, how long will it be before they find out their mistake?"

"I think," said the girl, reflectively, "that their game will be covert, not open, attack, from the fact that they have kept the loss of the papers so carefully from the servants. If this is true, they will move cautiously, and aim to convince the man that they do not suspect him."

Clarence nodded.

"You see the necessity for action, do you not?" Madeline said, after a silence. "I must make my next move within a few days."

"I don't fancy that we need fear any new developments that will be dangerous to our cause just yet."

Then he told them of his meeting with the detective and its results, adding, "You see, Jarvis can withold his reports to suit our convenience, and you can grow strong, feeling secure."

Meantime, Jarvis set about his task of record hunting. He was energetic and resolute as a sleuth hound on the scent; so he soon made one or two discoveries.

One day, very cleverly gotten up as a dapper lawyer, he dropped in at the office of Messrs. Lord and Myers, bankers. Mr. Lord was an old man with a shrewd, twinkling eye; and as the sham lawyer had selected his time wisely, he found the old banker alone.

They were closeted in close converse for nearly half an hour, at the end of which time, the dapper lawyer took his departure, looking rather downcast; and Mr. Lord, with his little eyes brighter than ever, sat down and penned a letter to his friend and brother banker, Mr. Allyne, of Baltimore.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR. LORD'S LETTER.

THE friendship that had sprung up between Claire Keith and Mrs. Ralston, grew and strengthened as the days went by.

Claire's enthusiasm had overflowed in more than one letter to Olive. The oft-repeated wish that her new friend and her much loved sister might meet, had at last drawn from that somewhat preoccupied sister a very cordial invitation to bring Mrs. Ralston to New York.

When this invitation came, Claire, feeling that it was now time to unfold to her friend the sad pages of Olive's history, sought her for that purpose. But as she deemed that the time had not yet come for telling anyone of the hoped-for lifting of the cloud, especially as to do so she must tell, too, of Madeline, she refrained from mentioning the names of the actors in that miserable drama.

Mrs. Ralston was deeply interested in the story of Olive's sorrow; and having heard it, she felt a stronger desire than before to see this beautiful, sad-hearted sister, who was so beloved by Claire. Bending down she kissed the fair face, flushed with excitement Claire always felt when recounting her sister's wrongs, and those of Philip Girard, and said, tenderly:

"Thank your sister in my name, my darling. And tell her that I will certainly avail myself of her kind invitation, at some future time."

Claire's eyes danced eagerly. "Oh, I wish we could go now—at least, soon."

Fate chose to grant Claire's desire in a most unexpected manner, for while they were still sitting, talking, in the semi-twilight, the library door opened and a servant announced Mr. Allyne, to see Mrs. Ralston. At once Mrs. Keith and her daughter arose to leave the room. But Mrs. Ralston said earnestly;

"Pray, do not go; there can be no need of a private interview."

And as at that moment Mr. Allyne himself appeared on the threshold, the ladies all advanced to welcome him, and, this ceremony being over, resumed their seats.

"I have just received this letter from Mr. Lord," said Mr. Allyne, after some moments of general conversation. "Read it, and tell me your opinion of its contents."

The lady took the letter, looking the while somewhat anxious. As she read, the look of apprehension deepened. When at last she dropped the letter, her hands were trembling visibly, and her face was pale and agitated. For a moment she sat in silence, her eyes full of fear and her hands working nervously. Then she seemed to recover herself by a powerful effort of will. Taking up the letter, she placed it in the hand of Mrs. Keith, saying: "Read it, dear friend."

Mrs. Keith took the letter and read:

NEW YORK, Dec. 7th.

WM. ALLYNE, Esq.—Dear Sir, a man assuming to be a lawyer called on me this afternoon, and requested information regarding our friend, Mrs. Ralston. If I am not much mistaken he is in reality a detective—I think I remember him in the Mallory case—and is, doubtless, looking up evidence in regard to the lady's second and most unfortunate marriage, either at the instigation of her vagabond husband or some of his supposed heirs.

If you know the present address of Mrs. R., it would be well to communicate with her, as some of her old servants are now in this city, at service, and this fellow might ferret out something through them.

Having no authority to act in the matter, I could do no more than baffle this man's enquiries so far as I was concerned, much as I desire to serve the lady when I know the way.

One thing: the fellow evidently believes in the story of her death.—Yours, etc.,

J. M. LORD.

The three, Mrs. Ralston, Claire and Mr. Allyne, listened in silence while Mrs. Keith read this letter. When at last she raised her eyes, Mrs. Ralston said:

"I must go to New York immediately, Mrs. Keith, and do, pray, allow Claire to accompany me. I must accept of the hospitality of Mrs. Girard, and I cannot go alone."

Mrs. Keith looked grave for a moment. Then, she said: "Mr. Allyne, is it necessary that Mrs. Ralston should go at once?"

"I think it advisable," replied Mr. Allyne. "Once in New York, Lord can receive Mrs. Ralston's instructions, and act for her. In cases like these I don't think it is best to trust to correspondence."

"And, oh! don't let us delay a moment! Once there I can keep my old servants, who are all true friends, from inadvertently betraying me. And I can trust Mr. Lord to find out who is the instigator of

this search," said Mrs. Ralston eagerly. "Mr. Allyne, when can we start; how soon?"

"Not earlier than to-morrow morning."

"Claire, can you be ready on such short notice?" asked the now anxious lady.

"I? Oh, yes, indeed!" laughed the girl. "I could be ready in an hour! I do detest waiting—don't you Mrs. Ralston?'

"Very much, just now," said that lady, making an effort to smile; forgive me, dear friends, but I am really unstrung. The thought of being hunted by that man is too horrible, after these years of peace."

"Then don't think of it, dear Mrs. Ralston," cooed Claire. "You will be as safe as in the seclusion of my sister's villa. And you can set things straight soon, when we have arrived. There can't be much to fear, can there, Mr. Allyne?"

"Nothing very formidable," said the banker, rising to take his leave. "Pray, don't exaggerate the trouble, Mrs. Ralston. Prompt attention, such as Lord will give the matter, will make all safe. Besides, he is not hunting *you;* the man thinks you dead."

"True; I had forgotten," said the lady, looking somewhat reassured. "Claire, we will pack to-night, and then try and be content until it is time to go."

"Meantime, I will telegraph to Lord and let him know that you will come, and when," said Mr. Allyne, taking up his hat to depart.

The morning of their departure dawned clear and bright. Claire was in extravagant spirits, while even Mrs. Ralston seemed to catch the infectious cheeriness of the day, and her companion's mood.

When they were about to enter the carriage that was to take them to the depot, a letter was put into the hand of Miss Keith. She flung back her veil and leaning back among the cushions perused it in attentive silence. Having finished, she looked up with a little frown upon her brow, and exclaimed:

"How very provoking!"

Mrs. Ralston looked alarmed. "Is your sister ill?"

"Oh, no; it's Madeline."

"The young girl I have heard you speak of?"

"Yes,"

"Is *she* ill?"

"No; she got well, just to avoid me; she is gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes; or will be, when we arrive. Why, how stupid I am not to explain! Madeline Payne has been with Olive nearly a week. She has been sick, but is better, and will leave there to-day."

Claire had said but little concerning Madeline, fearing lest in her enthusiasm she should say too much. But she had revolved many plans for bringing about a meeting between Mrs. Ralston and her "brave girl."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"I HAVE COME BACK TO MY OWN."

QUITE the pleasantest of all the rooms that had been so sumptuously fitted up, when "Mrs. Torrance" came to Oakley, a bride, was the back drawing-room. At least it was pleasantest in winter. Its large windows faced south and west, and all of the winter sunshine fell upon them, glowing through crimson curtains, and helping the piled-up anthracite in the grate to bathe the room in a ruddiness of crimson and golden bronze.

On this particular December day, the air was crisp and cold, and full of floating particles of hoar frost, while the winter sun shone bright and clear. Outside, one felt that it was an exceedingly cold sun. But viewed from within, it looked inviting enough, and one felt inspired to dash out into the frosty air and try if they could not walk *à la* hippogriff, without touching their feet to the ground.

Some such thought was floating through the mind of Mrs. John Arthur, who was progressing in her convalescence very

rapidly now, and who had, on this day, made her second descent to the drawing-rooms.

She had donned, for the first time since her illness, a dinner-dress of rosy silk, its sweeping train and elbow sleeves enriched with flounces of black lace. As there was, at present, no need to play the invalid—herself and Davlin being the sole occupants of the room—she was sweeping up and down its length like a caged lioness.

By and by she swerved from her course, and coming to the grate, put a daintily shod foot upon the bronze fender. Resting one hand on a chair, and looking down upon Davlin, who was lounging before the fire in full dinner costume, she said, abruptly:

"How very interesting all this is!"

Davlin made no sign that he heard.

"Do you know how long we have been playing this little game, sir?"

The man smiled, in that cool way, so exasperating always to her, and lifting one hand, began to tell off the months on his fingers.

"Let me see, ball opened in June, did it not?"

She nodded impatiently.

"June!" He was thinking of his June flirting with Madeline Payne, and involuntarily glanced at the windows from whence could be seen the very trees under which they had wandered, himself and that fair dead girl, in early June. "Yes, the last of June—I remember"—reflectively.

"And pray, from what event does your memory date?" exclaimed Cora, with strong sarcasm.

He glanced up quickly. "Why, *Ma Belle*, from your introduction to the hills and vales of Bellair, and the master of Oakley."

"Oh, I thought it was from the time you received your pistol wound."

Davlin smiled. "Yes, that scratch *was* given in June; but I don't date from trifles, Co."

"Oh! Well, I fancy it was not the fault of the hand that aimed the bullet, or rather of the *heart*, that you got a 'mere scratch.' I never believed in your card-table explanation of that affair, sir."

"Well, don't call *me* to account for *your* want of faith."

"I believe you promised yourself revenge on the fellow who shot at you. Why didn't you take it?"

Lucian stooped down and brushed an imaginary speck from his boot toe, saying, as he did so: "I was forestalled."

"How?"

"The—fellow—is dead."

"Oh, well, I don't care about dead men—what I am anxious about is this——"

"Oh, yes," maliciously. "Return to subject under discussion. You embarked in this enterprise in June——"

"Bother," impatiently.

"Late in summer, bagged your game; in early autumn, fitted up this jolly old rookery——"

Cora gave a sniff of disdain.

"Next—well, you know what next. We haven't been two months at this last job."

"Nevertheless I am tired of it."

"No?"

"I won't stay here a prisoner much longer!"

Davlin came close to her, and letting one hand rest upon her shoulder, placed the other over hers, which still lay upon the chair back.

"Cora, we won't quarrel about this. The situation is as trying to me as to you; more so. But our safety lies in moving with caution, and—I will not permit you to compromise us by any hasty act. You understand!"

His eyes held her as in a spell, and when, after a moment, the hand fell from her shoulder and his eyes withdrew their mesmeric gaze, the woman shrunk from under the one detaining hand and turned sullenly away, looking like a baffled leopardess.

Davlin resumed his seat and his former careless attitude. Cora walked to the window and looked down upon the scene below.

At length the man asked, carelessly: "Where's Percy?"

"Down there," nodding towards the terrace, a portion of which was visible from her point of view. "And, of course, my lady is in her room watching from her window. When he throws away his cigar, and turns towards the house, she will come down; not before."

Davlin laughed at her emphasis, and while the sound still vibrated on the air, the woman turned, and flinging herself upon a divan, said:

"There, she is coming!"

Complain as she might in private, Cora had acted her part to perfection. Between herself and Miss Arthur, there now existed an appearance of great cordiality and friendliness. While she treated Percy with utmost politeness and hospitality, the remembrance of ten years ago acted as an effectual bar to anything like coquetry, where he was concerned.

Scarcely had Cora settled herself comfortably upon her divan, when the door opened noiselessly, and Miss Arthur sailed in, diffusing through the room the odour of patchouli as she came. She was, as usual, a marvel of beflounced silk, false curls, rouge and pearl powder. Her face beamed upon Cora in friendliness as she approached her, saying, with much effusion:

"Oh, you poor child, how delightful to see you once more among us, and looking like yourself."

Lucian arose and gallantly wheeled forward a large easy chair, saying: "And how charming you look, Miss Ellen; you make poor Cora appear quite shabby by contrast."

Cora cast a rather ungrateful glance at the gentleman, and the spinster simpered, "Oh you horrid man! Brothers are so ungrateful!"

At this juncture, as Cora had predicted, Mr. Percy presented himself, and the four fell into attitudes, in front of the grate—Percy leaning on the back of Miss Arthur's chair, and Cora and Davlin in their former places.

"*Merci*," said Miss Arthur, pretending to stifle a yawn, "why can't we all be out in this keen air and sunshine? If there were but snow on the ground!"

"Snow!" cried Cora, annoyed out of her usual assumption of feebleness; "don't mention it, if you don't want me to die. We won't have snow, if you please, until I can drive in a cutter."

Percy laughed softly; his laugh was always disagreeable to Cora, as having an undercurrent of meaning intended for her alone. And Davlin said:

"Hear and heed, all ye gods of the wind and weather."

"Well, laugh," said Cora, half laughing herself, "but I am beginning to feel ambitious. Do let's try to set something afoot to make us feel as if we were alive, and glad that we were."

"Agreed, Cora," cried Miss Arthur, gushingly, "only tell us what it shall be."

"Suggest, suggest;" this from Davlin.

The spinster glanced up coquettishly "Edward, you suggest."

Percy caressed his blonde whiskers thoughtfully, and letting his eyes rest carelessly on Cora, said meaningly: "Let's poison each other!"

"Or commit suicide!" retorted Cora, coolly.

"Let's be more sensible," said Davlin. "Let's organize a matrimonial society, get up a wedding, and go on a journey,"

"Anything that will break the monotony," said Cora, while the fair spinster giggled and put her hand before her face.

At that moment the monotony *was* broken.

While the words were still lingering on the lips of the fair convalesent, the door was opened wide by old Hagar, who said, as if she had been all her life announcing the arrival of great ones at the court of St. James:

"*Miss Madeline Payne!*"

Then she stepped back, and a vision appeared before them which struck them dumb and motionless with surprise.

Across the threshold swept a young lady, richly robed in trailing silk and velvet and fur; with a face fair as a star-flower, haughty as the face of any duchess; with amber eyes that gazed upon them contemptuously, masterfully, fearlessly; with wave upon wave of golden brown hair, clustering about the temples and snowy neck; and with scarlet lips half parted in a scornful smile.

She swept the length of the room with matchless grace and self-possession, and pausing before the astonished group, said, in a voice clear as the chime of silver bells:

"Good-evening, ladies and gentlemen! I believe I have not the honour of knowing—ah, yes, this is Miss Arthur; *Aunt Ellen* how do you do?"

There are some scenes that beggar description, and this was such an one.

Miss Arthur, who clearly recognised in this lovely young lady the little Madeline of years ago, was so stricken with astonishment that she utterly forgot how appropriate it would be to faint.

Cora sat like one in a nightmare.

Percy was conscious of but one feeling. True to his nature even here, he was staring at this vision of beauty, thinking only, "how lovely! how lovely!"

And Lucian Davlin? At the first sight of that face, the first sound of that voice, he had felt as if turning to stone, incapable of movement or speech. At that moment, had Cora once glanced toward him, his face must have betrayed his secret. But her eyes were fixed on Madeline.

Davlin felt a tempest raging within his bosom. Madeline alive! This glowing, brilliant, richly robed, queenly creature—Madeline! Again in his ears rang her farewell words. Quick as lightning came the thought: she was his enemy, she would denounce him; And yet, throughout every fibre of his being, he felt a thrill of gladness. Again there surged in his heart the mad love that had sprung into being when she had so gloriously defied him. She was not dead, and he was glad!

Old Hagar had closed the door after her young mistress; and now she stood near it, calm and immovable as a block of ice.

Madeline Payne stood, for a moment, gazing laughingly into the amazed face of the spinster. Then she said: "Come, come, Aunt Ellen, don't stare at me as if I were a ghost! Introduce me to your friends. Is this lady my new step-mamma?"

Cora roused herself from her stupor, and said, haughtily: "I am *Mrs. Arthur*, and the mistress of the house!"

"Ah! then you *are* my new step-mamma? And you have been very ill, I understand. Pray, don't rise, madame; you look feeble." Then, turning again to Miss Arthur: "Don't you intend to speak to me, Aunt Ellen?"

"But," gasped the spinster, "I thought, that—you ——"

"Oh, I see! You thought that I was dead, and you have been grieving for me. Well, I will explain: I ran away from my respected papa because he had selected for me a husband not at all to my taste. Not desiring to return immediately, I seized an opportunity that came in my way, and bestowed my name upon a poor girl who died in the hospital, thus making sure that my anxious friends would abandon all search for me. However, I have thought better of my decision, and so I return to my own home to take my position under the *chaperonage* of my pretty step-mamma, as the *Heiress of Oakley!*"

These last words opened the eyes of Cora to the new "situation." Springing to her feet, she forgot for the moment all her weakness, and cried, wrathfully: "You cannot come here with such a trumped-up story! Madeline Payne is dead and buried. You are a base impostor!"

Madeline turned tranquilly towards the spinster. "Aunt Ellen, *am* I an impostor?"

"No," said Ellen Arthur, sullenly; "you are Madeline Payne. Any one in the village could testify to that."

Madeline turned to Cora. "Step-mamma, I forgive you. It *is* hard to find the entailed estate of Oakley slipping out of your hands, no doubt, but this world is full of disappointments."

Cora's eyes sought Lucian. That gentleman, who had, outwardly at least, regained his composure, telegraphed her to be silent.

Miss Payne asked: "Which of these gentlemen is your brother, Mrs. Arthur?"

Lucian stepped forward with his usual grace, saying: "I am Mrs. Arthur's brother, Miss Payne. Pray, let me apologize for her discourteous reception of you; she has been very ill, and is nervous."

Madeline sank into a chair and surveyed him coolly, while she said: "It is not necessary to apologize for your sister, Mr. ——"

"Davlin," supplied Miss Arthur.

"Davlin," repeated Madeline, as if the name had fallen upon her ears for the first time. "No doubt we shall be the best of friends by and by. I certainly have to thank her for making so marked an improvement in these old rooms," glancing about her.

Here the still confused Miss Arthur, in obedience to a sign from her lover, said: "Miss Madeline, this is my friend, Mr. Percy."

Mr. Percy advanced, bowing like a courtier. The young lady scrutinized him coolly, saying, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes: "I am delighted to meet any friend of my aunt's."

Then she turned to Davlin again: "But where is my step-papa? I have kept myself partially informed of events here. Is he still unable to be about?"

Davlin looked very serious: "Miss Payne, I fear that my unhappy brother-in-law will never recover his reason."

Madeline uttered an exclamation expressive of concern, and said: "Oh, Mr. Davlin, then don't let him know that I am here; at least not yet. I am so afraid of the insane. I couldn't bear to see him now

Cora drew a breath of relief on hearing this. But Lucian, who knew the girl better, began to fear her, and mentally resolved to define his own position as speedily as possible. One thing was evident; it was no part of her plan to betray him, at least not yet.

"Nurse," said Madeline, turning to Hagar, "see that a room is prepared for me immediately, and send a servant to the station for my luggage. Also, prepare a room for my maid, who is below, and tell her to get me out a dinner dress immediately."

Then turning to Cora, "Step-mamma, you look fatigued. Do go to your room and rest before dinner. Mr. Davlin, at what hour do you dine?"

He explained their reason for dining so early, and she said, as she turned again to Cora:

"Do lie down, step-mamma; there is still a half-hour before dinner. And now I will go and look after my maid."

She swept them all a stately courtsey, and Percy springing forward to open the door, she thanked him with a charming side glance, and passed from the room like a young princess.

There was dead silence among them for a full minute after the door had closed behind her. Then Percy turned with a disagreeable smile upon his face, and said:

"You don't stand in need of something exciting *now*, do you—Mrs. Arthur?"

This was too much. Cora sprang to her feet and casting one meaning glance toward Davlin, swept from the room, erect and firm, utterly regardless of the fact that her exit was quite incompatible with the invalid *rôle* she had been sustaining.

An angry flush overspread the face of Lucian Davlin, as he realized, after one quick look at the face of Percy, how thoroughly she had betrayed herself. He was too good a diplomat, however, to quit the field without a stroke in his own behalf. So giving a low whistle he turned toward the spinster, saying:

"See what excitement will do. One would think she had the strength of two of us."

To which Percy responded, drily; "She certainly did not step like an invalid."

Then the three stood looking aimlessly at each other or anything, seemingly not at all inclined to converse.

After a few moments of listless gazing out at the window, Lucian turned upon his heel and quitted the room. He was too wise to approach Cora in her present mood. Even had he thought it advisable, he felt little inclination to see and converse with her or anyone then. Like a man in a dream, he wandered out and down the wide hall. Almost unconsciously he opened the library door, and crossing to the great double window, leaned against the casement and looked out.

Again his eyes rested upon the grove where he had so often wandered with the lovely girl who, to-day, had so coolly ignored him. Then she had clung to him with trusting affection; now—how did she look upon him now? Could the love that she surely had felt for him in those summer days have entirely died out in her heart? Did not a woman's love outlast her anger? And was he not the same man, with the same will-power, and the same strength of magnetism?

Where had she been all these months? And how came she here now, robed like a princess; she, who had certainly left her home penniless? Clearly, she had found friends. Who were they? And what did they know of matters here at Oakley?

For once Mr. Davlin was at a loss how to act. Would it be safe to stay? Would it be wise to go? Would he be able to control Cora in this new emergency? One thing was certain: The heiress of Oakley meant to be mistress in her mother's house, and she was in a fair way to possess the throne.

Lucian turned away from the window, and from the scene that mocked him, muttering: "I will see her alone, let come what will. I will make one struggle to regain my power over her, and if I succeed ——"

Evidently the wily gambler could not testify as to what would be likely to follow. For the second time since his partnership with Cora, he found that lady a stumbling-block by no means despicable.

On leaving the drawing-room, Cora rushed up the stairs, and throwing open the door of her dressing-room, fairly precipitated herself across the threshold, forgetting in her blind rage to close the door behind her. She stood still for an instant, and then, springing to the window, threw it wide open, letting in a flood of wintry air. For a moment she leaned across the sill, drinking in deep draughts of the frosty ether. Then dashing down the sash, she turned swiftly, and encountered a pair of bright black eyes that looked in at her from the secure darkness of the hall. Sweeping across the room, she confronted the owner of the eyes, demanding haughtily:

"Who are you? And how dare you spy at my door?"

The woman—for it was a woman—came forward and said, respectfully: "If you please, I am Miss Payne's maid, and I was just bringing up some things from the hall, ma'am," lifting to view a chatelaine and shawl strap. "I didn't mean to annoy you. I was only surprised to see such a pretty young lady here."

Miss Payne's maid was a large woman of a very uncertain age, arrayed in sober black, not at all like the usual ladies' maid. But she seemed so very respectful, and full of contrition at having annoyed such a "pretty lady," that Cora made no further assault upon her, but closed the door with unusual emphasis instead, and gave way once more to the wrath that was filling her soul.

To be baffled like this now; now, when her schemes were approaching fruition; now, when this fair domain, this splendid fortune, was just within her grasp, to have it plucked from her hand by a mere girl, who mocked her while she said, "this

wealth is mine, this house is mine: woman, you have schemed in vain!"

And this was not all. She had bound herself hand and foot. She had jeopardized her liberty, for what might not occur, now that this girl could demand access to the imprisoned old man, her step-father? If she dared, she would go away that very night. But no; this would only confirm suspicion, if suspicion were entertained.

Not the least drop in her cup of bitterness, was the knowledge that Edward Percy was secretly enjoying her discomfiture. As she thought of him, and his look when she swept past him, Cora stopped short in her angry promenade, and frowned fiercely. Then she crossed to her mirror and surveyed her agitated face, saying, half aloud;

"At least I will rob him of that pleasure; baffled as I may be, he shall never enjoy my discomfiture! I can act a part yet. And Edward Percy shall find that if my schemes are to be overthrown, his, too, may suffer. He rejoices to see me thwarted; I will thwart him, let it cost what it may!"

And Cora began to smooth her rumpled locks, and put her somewhat disarranged toilet in order, with swift, firm fingers. While she was thus occupied, there came a tap upon her door. Recognising it at once, as Davlin's knock, she said, "come," and never once lifted her eyes from her task.

Lucian, finding that the dinner hour was at hand, and beginning to fear that Cora might still further commit herself, had thought it wisest to come and see what was the state of her feelings, and endeavour to persuade her to play out her part. He entered the room with some apprehension; but seeing her so composed, came close as she stood before her dressing-glass and said, as he gazed down at the flounce she was busy adjusting:

"Now is the time for pluck, Co. You will come down?"

Cora gave a last touch to the silk and lace and then, letting the sweeping train fall from her hand, and standing very erect before him, said:

"Yes, I shall go down. Do you suppose I will let that man think that I am completely annihilated? There; don't talk to me now! I shall not forget myself again, never fear. But after dinner, come to me here. You were wise enough to bring me into this charming 'corner,' now let your wisdom take me out of it, or I will extricate myself in my own way."

Again the iron hand fell upon her shoulder, as her partner in iniquity hissed in her ear:

"And I intend that you shall not be a fool! Our game is not lost. Let me once get the lay of the land, and we may win yet."

She turned her eyes upon him with angry incredulity. "How, pray?"

"Wait and see?"

She made no reply, but, taking up her dainty handkerchief, turned to leave the room, motioning him to precede her. In the hall, she paused at the head of the stairs, saying:

"Go down; I will come directly."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go down," she repeated; I know what I am doing."

She went slowly down the hall in the direction of the room before which stood Madeline's luggage that had just arrived from the little station.

Lucian gazed after her in some amazement, watched her tap softly, heard the door open, saw her enter the room, and then went slowly down stairs.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CORA UNDER ORDERS.

WHEN Cora entered the room, Madeline Payne stood before her mirror, while her maid, kneeling beside her, arranged the folds of lustrous azure silk that fell about the slender form. The door had been opened by Hagar, who could scarcely keep her eyes off the beautiful face and form of her young mistress, and who was, in con-

equence, making very slow progress with he work of putting away the garments hat had been discarded in favour of the lovely dinner dress.

Madeline realised fully that the part she was now playing was even more difficult and distasteful than that which she had abandoned. But she was resolute. To go back now would be worse than death. While she felt a thrill of repugnance as she saw the fair, sensual face of John Arthur's wife reflected in her mirror, she turned with smiling countenance, saying:

"Is it you, step-mamma? How kind of you! Am I delaying the dinner?"

"No more than I am," smiled Cora, in return. I thought you might like me to wait for you, as you are so much of a stranger to your old home."

"Oh, I am not at all timid, I assure you; but it is nicer to go together. Am I almost ready, Strong?"

"Almost, Miss Payne."

"How quickly your maid dresses you," said Cora, resolved to keep the conversational ball rolling.

"Oh, yes; Strong knows how to pack things so that what you want first is uppermost, and I had my dinner dress in a hand travelling-case." Then, turning about she asked, abruptly: "Have you a good maid, step-mamma?"

Cora laughed nervously as she replied: "I have no maid, good or bad. My maid ran away a week ago, after robbing me and nearly killing me with chloroform."

"Mercy, what a wretch! What have you done with her?"

"We have not found her."

"Did you look."

"Yes; detectives are looking for her now."

"Well, I hope they will find her. Now I am ready; come, step-mamma."

And together the two descended the stairs. Three faces reflected three degrees of surprise, as the ladies entered the drawing-room with every appearance of good feeling and mutual satisfaction. Davlin and Percy took their cue immediately. The only one whom an observer would have pronounced not quite at ease, was Miss Ellen Arthur, who stared from one to the other rather more than was polite, and who sustained her part in the conversation in a very nervous and fragmentary manner.

Dinner being announced, Mr. Davlin promptly offered his arm to Madeline, who accepted it with perfect nonchalance. They followed Cora to the dining-room, themselves followed by Miss Arthur and Percy.

Where four people separately, and each for his own end, determine to appear cordial and perfectly at ease, each one bent upon completely blinding the other three, there must of a necessity be much conversation, and more or less hilarity, whether real or assumed.

These four, who were waging upon each other secret and deadly war, ate and drank together; and while Madeline regaled them with a fictitious account of herself during the time she was supposed dead, the others listened and commented, and vied with each other in paying hypocritical court to the heiress of Oakley.

"You see, step-mamma," said Madeline as they lingered over their dessert, "I was never ignorant of what was going on here. My old nurse kept me informed. When I sent you the fiction of my death, I had no intention of returning, for I had determined never to live at Oakley during my step-father's reign. But upon hearing of his insanity, I resolved to come back, being now, of course, the real head of the house. Mr. Arthur being *non compos mentis*, I, as heiress, assume control of my own."

If a wish could have killed, Cora would have closed for ever that insolent smiling mouth. But she felt herself powerless.

Davlin, with inimitable tact, came to her rescue: "Cora will be only too glad to welcome the queen back to her own. Indeed, she has been for some time declaring her intention of abdicating, for a time at least, and taking Mr. Arthur south to some medicinal springs. But the doctor fears the change will not benefit him."

Madeline turned her eyes upon Cora. "She can't go just yet," she said, with odd decision; "I want her society. Where is your doctor, Mr. Davlin?"

"He is up-stairs with his patient, Miss Payne. He usually joins us at breakfast, but not often at dinner."

The truth was that Lucian, not feeling upon safe ground, had advised the "doctor" to keep discreetly out of the way of this shrewd young lady for the present, lest her keen questions should draw out something not to their advantage.

Miss Payne turned to Cora again. "You have perfect confidence in the skill of this doctor, step-mamma?"

"Oh, yes!" said Cora, positively; "he has been known to me a very long time. Besides we had in one of the Bellair doctors, who agreed with Dr. Le Guise in every particular."

"Well, I must see this learned gentleman to-morrow, and my step-papa also, I think. Step-mamma, you look fatigued; dining is too much for your strength. Let us leave the gentlemen to their wine and cigars."

As if she had been presiding at that table all her life, Miss Payne arose, bowed to the two men, and preceding the two astonished ladies, swept from the dining-room.

Cora, as she followed the graceful figure could hardly restrain her mortification and rage. She felt a longing amounting almost to frenzy, to spring upon the girl and stab her in the back.

The two men did not linger long in the dining-room. Each felt anxious, for reasons of his own, to be again in the presence of Miss Payne, and so soon joined the ladies in the drawing-room.

After a little more hypocracy on all their parts, Cora arose to retire to her apartments, declaring that the excitement of Miss Payne's arrival had made her forgetful of herself and her health, and that she began to feel her fictitious strength departing.

Madeline, too, arose, and offering her arm to Cora, said that she would also retire. Nodding a careless good-night to the three deserted ones, she left the room with the fair invalid leaning languidly upon her arm.

To the surprise and dissatisfaction of Cora, Madeline not only accompanied her to her own apartment, but entered with her. Having closed the door carefully behind them, she turned about, and dropping all her assumed gaiety and friendliness, said with the air of a queen commanding a subject:

"Now, Mrs. Arthur, let us understand each other!"

The sudden and marked change in her voice and manner startled the woman out of all her self-possession. She stood staring in the stern face of the girl with all of the audacity frightened out of her own.

Cora was an adventuress to the tips of her fingers. She was fond of intrigue; she possessed a certain kind of courage; but she was, after all, at heart, a coward. She was quite willing to compromise her soul for gain, but not her body. In short, she loved herself too well to find any piquancy in personal danger.

Since the loss of the papers and the flight of Céline Leroque had shaken her feeling of security, Cora had been restive and anxious to bring this plot to a climax. She had found it not at all to her taste to have Percy holding over her head a sword, be it ever so slender. And now, as she confronted Madeline, all her selfishness was alarmed. She waited in absolute fear the next words from the lips of her enemy.

"You need not weary yourself by playing the invalid in my presence, madame," pursued the girl. "I am quite well aware that your illness has been all a sham. I know, too, that you have found the *rôle* of invalid very irksome."

The eyes of Cora widened still more, and all the colour fled from her lips. But she made a fierce struggle and, although she could not summon up her usual insolence, she managed to gasp out, half defiantly:

"What do you mean?"

"You understand my meaning," replied the girl, with contempt. "I mean that

you are in my power, and that you must obey my will."

For a moment Cora's anger outweighed her fear. She came a step nearer and said, sneeringly: "Indeed, Miss Payne! That remains to be seen!"

"True, assented Madeline, coldly. "First, then, you had better instruct your friend, Dr. Le Guise, not to administer *hasheesh* to Mr. Arthur to-morrow, in order to have him properly insane when I visit him."

Cora's knees bent under her, and all the colour fled out of her face. But she rallied her flying courage enough to say: Explain yourself, Miss Payne."

Madeline drew toward her Cora's easiest lounging chair, and seated herself therein with much deliberation, saying, as she did so:

"You had better sit down, Mrs. Arthur; there is no necessity for a display of anger, or for any more attempts at deception. The one is as useless as the other is transparent. And I have considerable to say to you."

Cora moved sullenly toward a chair and sank into it, feeling like a woman in a nightmare.

"First, then, for your position," pursued Madeline. "It is sufficient to say that I know of your scheme to dispose of Mr. Arthur and inherit the wealth you supposed to be his."

Cora was beginning to feel a return of combativeness, and she exclaimed quickly: "That is false!"

"I know," pursued her inquisitor, ignoring her retort, "that this man you call 'Dr. Le Guise,' is your tool, and—*I have had every drug that has been prescribed by him analyzed by city physicians!*"

Cora saw that she was indeed undone and began to fight with the recklessness of despair. "I don't believe you!" she cried, reckless that she was committing herself. "That old spy, Hagar, has fancied these things. How could you get the medicines?"

"Not through Hagar."

"How then?"

"*Just as I got the certificate of your marriage with Mr. Percy.*"

The woman sprang to her feet. "You —you are ——"

"Céline Leroque, madame!" with an imitation of the ladies' maid accent.

Cora fell back in her chair panting.

"Now," resumed Madeline, "why don't you reflect that, if it were my intention to denounce you, I could have done that long ago. Are you not aware that my stepfather is my enemy?"

"Not—in that way."

"In that way precisely. John Arthur tortured my mother until she died heartbroken. He made my childhood miserable, and shut me up in a convent to pass my girlhood in loneliness. He bartered me in marriage to a man older and uglier than himself, for ten thousand dollars. Then I defied him to his face; swore to revenge upon him my mother's wrongs and mine; and ran away. Do you understand now why I have allowed you to persecute John Arthur?"

Cora's courage began to revive. "I think I do," she said, slowly.

"You see, Mrs. Arthur, it is in my power to arrest you; first, for Bigamy, and second, for Attempted Poisoning."

Cora looked at her coolly. "But you won't do either," she said.

"Won't I? And why not?"

"Because, to do either, you must bring your own name into too prominent notice."

Madeline laughed scornfully.

"You forget," she said, "I left my home for revenge. I feigned to be dead—I returned to Oakley in disguise—for revenge. Do you think that I will let my pride stay me when, by exposing you, I can complete my vengeance upon John Arthur?"

Cora's countenance fell. She had not viewed the matter in just that light. She made no answer, and Madeline continued:

"Don't flatter yourself that I shall hesitate, if I cannot effect my purpose otherwise. I am not disposed just now to war with you, but if you do not see fit to accept

my terms, then I must turn against you."

"What do you want of me?" sullenly.

"I want you to continue as we have begun. I want Miss Arthur, Mr. Percy and your brother, to believe us the best of friends. Above all, I want John Arthur to think us allies."

"And what then?"

"Then, you will be safe so far as I am concerned. Then, when I have accomplished my purpose and hold in my hands the keys to the Oakley coffers, you shall have money, and shall go hence to resume your career in whatever field you choose."

"What security have I for all this?"

"My word!"

"And if I reject your terms?"

Madeline smiled oddly.

"What is to prevent my leaving this place now, to-night?" said Cora.

"Madeline laughed, saying: "Do you want to try that?"

"If I did, what then?"

"Then—you would not be permitted to leave these premises!"

"Ah! you have spies in this house!"

"Yes; and out of it. There is no chance for you to escape. There is no chance for anyone to escape. Mrs. Arthur, is this man that you call your brother really such, or is he, too, in your plot?"

Cora looked at her keenly, but it was no part of Madeline's plan to let her know that she had ever seen Lucian Davlin before that evening. Her face was as calm and inscrutable as the face of the sphinx.

"No," said Cora, at length "my brother does not know of it."

"I am glad of that," replied Madeline. "But, for fear of any deception, he will be kept under *surveillance;* and if anything is communicated to him I shall surely know it."

"Why did you rob me of those papers?" asked Cora, abruptly.

"Because," said Madeline, leaning forward, "you and I have a common enemy."

"What! not Percy?"

"Yes, Percy!"

Cora looked amazed. "But—have you known him before?"

"I never saw him until he came to Oakley."

"I can't see how he has incurred your enmity here."

"He has not incurred my enmity here. I hated him before I ever saw him."

"Why?"

"Because he has wronged a friend who is as dear to me as life!"

"Oh!"

"Don't puzzle your brain over this; you won't be enlightened. It is sufficient for you to know that you can serve me if you choose, because we are both enemies of the same men." Then, rising, "Now choose; will you remain here as my ally, or leave in disgrace, and a prisoner, as my enemy?"

Cora reflected, and finally said: "I accept your terms."

Very good; and now for precautions. You must allow me to supply you with a maid."

"What?"

"You are an invalid; I am well and strong. What could be more natural than that I should desire you to have every care and comfort that I can desire? I shall give you my maid; she will supply the place of Céline Leroque."

"I won't have her," cried Cora, angrily. "I won't have a jailer"

"Certainly not; you will have my maid however. I will get another to-morrow."

"I won't have her!"

"Nonsense." Madeline stepped quickly to the door and opened it. "Strong," she said, softly.

Instantly in stepped Strong, who had been just outside awaiting the orders of her mistress.

"Strong," said Madeline, "I am going to let you wait upon Mrs. Arthur. She is in delicate health, and needs a maid. You must be *very attentive*, and don't let her get into any draughts. You can sleep in the

dressing-room ; and if she is not *well cared for*, I shall hold you accountable."

Cora looked at the big, robust woman, so appropriately called Strong, and felt that she was indeed a prisoner.

Strong bowed in silent submission to the will of her late mistress, and turned her broad visage upon her new one.

Madeline moved to leave the room, saying, with a return to her former manner: "Good-night, step-mamma; try and go down to breakfast with me in the morning, won't you ?"

Without waiting for a reply, she opened the door and swept across the hall, and Cora heard her door close behind her. Not deigning a single glance at Strong, Cora sat tapping her foot upon the carpet and reviewing the situation. After some angry musing, the practical side of her nature began to assert itself. She reflected that she was not, after all, in immediate danger; and that she would be still, to all outward appearance, the mistress of Oakley. There was not much to fear just now, and she would keep her eyes open.

Meantime, she would not be unnecessarily uncomfortable. And so, being by nature indolent, she decided to make the most of the unwelcome Strong. Turning toward the statue-like figure near the door, she galvanized it into life by saying :

" Strong, got my dressing-gown from that closet, and then take off my dress."

And Strong commenced her duties with cheerful alacrity.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MYSTIFIED PEOPLE.

JOHN ARTHUR sat before a smouldering fire, gazing moodily down at the charred embers that had lost their glow and only showed a dark red light here and there, as if to assure one that there was fire in the grate.

He was thinner than of old. His face wore a sickly pallor. His hands that, clutched the arms of his invalid's chair worked incessantly, indicating surely that his nerves were in anything but a state of calm. He was feeble, too, in body ; but his mind spite of the verdict of the Bellair physician and the drugs of the Professor, was still unimpared.

In the solitude of the two rooms, out of which he had not once stepped since first he was removed to the west wing, he had had ample time for reflection ; but he had by no means arrived at a state of mental beatitude.

He had found it useless to struggle, useless to bluster, to argur or to plead. Henry was a merciless jailer, and Dr. Le Guise a sarcastic one.

His breakfast had been served, and stood upon the table beside him ; but he scarcely glanced at it. When Henry came in from the anti-room to remove the things, he said, without looking up: "Go ask Le Guise to come to me."

Henry carried away the tray, deposited it in the anti-room, locked the door of the chamber carefully, and made his way to the breakfast-room.

At that moment, the incongruous mixture called the family, were then assembled, including the Professor. The latter was just then discussing the condition of his patient with Miss Payne, in blissful ignorance of the fact that the young lady was fully conversant with his mode of treatment, and the true condition of her step-father's health.

"You see, my dear young lady," the Professor said, pompously, " his is the worst form of insanity; the very worst. When a patient raves constantly we know precisely what to do with him. But when he is, at times, to all appearance, as sane as yourself, and yet liable at any moment to blaze out a perfect madman, one dislikes to treat him as a madman, and yet it is not safe to consider him a sane being."

Madeline nodded, with a splendid assumption of profound interest.

" It's a sad case," she said, pensively. " I almost dread the interview."

"I think he is quite collected this morning, and he may be calm throughout. I hope so, for I should not like to have you witness one of his tantrums."

"I have seen him in tantrums when he was considered sane," said the girl, with an odd intonation.

Then looking up, she saw Henry, who had entered the room and stood staring at her in speechless amazement. Hagar had informed him that his young mistress was in the house. But he was not prepared for the vision of loveliness that the girl presented, as she turned toward him clad in her morning robe of snowy cashmere bordered with swansdown, and trailing after her like a train of snow. Luckily no one noted his start of surprise and quick glance of recognition, and Madeline said:

"Is not that my step-father's attendant, doctor? I think he wants you."

The "doctor" beckoned Henry to approach, and said, affably: "Well, and how is our patient, Henry?"

"About as usual, sir. But he wants to see you."

"Oh, he does? Poor soul, I'll come directly, Henry," Then, turning to Madeline: "Shall I break to him the news of your arrival?"

"No; not unless you think it unsafe to surprise him."

"On the contrary, an agreeable surprise might prove beneficial,"

The Professor, who had received sundry instructions from Davlin, assumed to be ignorant of the fact that the patient supposed his step-daughter dead.

Smiling a little at the hypocrisy of the man, who pretended to have at heart the interest of a patient supposed to be in an excessively nervous state, yet was quite ready to expose that patient to the shock of meeting, without previous preparation, one supposed to be dead and in her grave, Madeline turned, and with a gesture brought Cora to her side.

"Is Dr. Le Guise aware that my step-papa believes me to be dead?" she asked.

Cora and the Professor looked dubiously at one another for an instant. Then the former, seeing her cue in the face of the latter, said: "He is not."

"Well, step-mamma, I am going up to see him soon, and, on second thought, it will be best to have the doctor inform him of my resurrection."

Cora nodded.

"And," pursued the girl, "I will only say that I desire you, doctor, to inform him that I feigned death for reasons of my own. That I am here in the flesh and will appear in his presence soon. When you have prepared him for my coming, have the goodness to come down and tell me."

Saying this she turned away, after which the Professor quitted the room to obey the summons of his patient.

Lucian Davlin had witnessed the interview, the summons and the departure, from a distance. He had found no opportunity for conversing with Cora, as yet, and was sorely puzzled by the present aspect of affairs.

He had watched the two narrowly, but he found himself unable to read the true meaning lurking beneath the soft words that fell from the lips of Madeline. He could hear no jar in the music of her voice, could catch no glance that would give the lie to her honeyed words. She was playing her part like a born actress.

He had not expected to see Cora accept the situation without a struggle. He was glad to find that there was to be no scene, and yet—somehow he felt himself at a disadvantage.

He had viewed the situation from his standpoint, however, and had decided upon his course of action.

First, he was resolved not to quit the field until he had made a desperate attempt to regain his power over the heiress of Oakley. Second, he would use stratagem in order to obtain an interview with her.

In due time, Dr. Le Guise came among them once more, and announced to Madeline his readiness to conduct her into the presence of his patient.

"He is quite prepared to see me, then?" questioned Madeline.

"Quite, although I left him a trifle agitated and upset."

As they paused at the door leading from the hall of the west wing, she said:

"I will go in alone, Dr. Le Guise."

"As you please." Then, as if it were an afterthought. "I really believe, for your own safety, you had better keep Henry near you."

"I shall be in no danger," she replied, and entered the outer chamber, closing and locking the door after herself.

In answer to her knock, the door of the ante-room was unlocked and opened by Henry. Madeline swept across the threshold and extended her hand to the faithful fellow, saying:

"Henry, I am glad to see you. I hope you do not find your present duties too heavy?"

"Not since I knew I was serving you, miss," said the man, respectfully.

"You are serving me, Henry. I need you here very much; and rest assured you shall have your reward for all you have done or may do for me."

Evidently the prospect of reward was not unpleasing to him. His countenance beamed satisfaction.

"And, Henry," continued his mistress, "attend to this. You are not, on any account, to give your charge any more of the medicine prepared for him by the doctor."

A look of surprise shone from the eyes of the negro, but he answered simply, like the well-trained servant he was: "Yes, miss."

"Above all, Henry, you are to let the doctor think that you administer all that he gives you."

Henry signified that he fully understood and would obey his instructions. Then he opened the inner door, and John Arthur and Madeline Payne stood once more face to face!

For a moment, the two eyed each other in silence. Then John Arthur said, with a sneer on his lip, and in a tone which proved clearly that time and imprisonment had not taught him meekness:

"So, you young jade, what escapade have you been up to now? And how dare you come back here like a young princess? Why don't you keep out of my house?"

Madeline laughed scornfully. "*Your* house—But I forgive you, step-papa; of course you are not accountable for your words."

Her tone was mockery itself. The man found it difficult to restrain his wrath as he looked in her scornful face and said: "Don't dare to pretend to believe that I am crazy! Are you in league against me, too?"

Wishing to draw from him just how much of the baseness of Cora he believed in, or suspected, she dropped her voice and asked, in assumed surprise: "Is it possible that you believe someone to be plotting against you?"

"Is it *possible!* How else could I be kept shut up a prisoner in my own house?"

The girl seemed to ponder. "Who is your enemy?" she asked.

"Everyone in this house."

"What! Surely not your wife?"

"I'm not so certain of that."

"But she, too, has been sick."

"Have they locked *her* up?" snapped he.

Madeline smiled. "Well, not exactly; she is not allowed much liberty, though."

"Why won't she come and see me?"

"Mercy! She is too delicate."

"Seems to me you are well informed for one so lately arrived."

"I *am* well informed, Mr. Arthur. But I am not a late arrival."

"What do you mean?" sullenly.

"Just what I say," with an odd laugh. "I have been in this house since you were first put in these rooms."

He sat like one stupified. At last he sprang up and fairly yelled: "In the fiend's name, explain this chicanery. Why are you here? Who is keeping me a prisoner,

and wherefore? Is it *you*, you little virago?"

"Softly, step-papa; one thing at a time. I am here because *you* are here," she said, in a voice of unruffled calm. "Who is keeping you a prisoner, you ask? I am."

Once more he seemed on the point of giving way to a paroxysm of rage, but controlled himself and said, sullenly:

"I suppose I may thank you for my imprisonment from first to last."

"You may thank me if you choose, but it will be bestowing your gratitude upon the wrong party. I did not lock you up. I simply permitted it."

"And why have you leagued with my wife—curse her—to shut me up like a thief?"

"Why," her voice rising in angry scorn, "Do you ask me *why?* Why did you make my mother almost a prisoner in her own home? Why did you crush her in life, and blaspheme her in death? Why did you drive her daughter from the home that was hers, to escape from your cruelty, your insults, your avarice? John Arthur, how dare you ask me *why* you are here?"

Again the flashing eye, the ringing, wrathful voice, the white, uplifted hand. They menaced him again, as on that June evening when she had defied him and then fled out into the darkness, not to return, save in dreams, until now.

Again he felt a thrill of terror, and he sat before her mute and cowering. At last he found voice to say: "Do you mean that you intend to keep me a prisoner?"

Her eyes met his full. They were cold as snow and resolute as fate. "You will never leave these rooms until you accede to the terms I have to propose."

Her audacity fairly stunned him. He fell back a pace as he said: "What—terms?"

"First, you are to agree to resign the guardianship of my property. Second, you are to leave Oakley forthwith and forever, and to keep ever and always away from me and all that is mine."

"Bah!" he cried, angrily, "do you think I am a fool? I won't resign my guardianship; the property is *mine*, not yours!"

"Then I will chose a new guardian immediately. How ignorant of law you are, step-papa! Don't you know that you are legally *dead?* Don't you know that a lunatic can't hold property? Legally, I can choose a guardian to-morrow."

"You she-devil! But I am not a lunatic!" sneered he.

"How obtuse you are, step-papa! You *are* a lunatic; we have the certificates of two physicians to that effect; and that is all the law requires. Now, be reasonable: what can you do?"

"I'll get out, by heavens," he yelled, "and I'll put you in State's prison for false imprisonment!"

She turned upon him with utmost composure. My dear sir, you have not one witness to prove that you are a sane man. There are many to prove that you have been subject to violent fits of madness."

She turned again, and he, no longer seeking to control his rage, sprang toward her, uttering a volley of curses.

During the entire interview, Henry had stood like a sentinel at the outer door of the ante-room, while that leading into the chamber of the prisoner stood wide open. At the first accent of rage, he darted forward; and as the girl sprang away from her step-father, that gentleman found himself seized and hurled with scant ceremony to the middle of the room.

"Don't you try that, sir!" cried Henry, in high wrath. "You won't find me a friend, if you do."

"So," panted the old man, "this is one of your hirelings is it? And pray, sir, what is this young fiend to pay you for your services?"

"That's my affair," responded the man, coolly. "You can't buy me off; and if you try that game again, you will get yourself into a straight jacket,"

Madeline laughed, and said: "There, Henry, you need not be alarmed for me. But when you report this attack to the

doctor, tell him that I think he had better take measures to secure his safety and yours, in case your patient should be again seized with a fit of violence."

John Arthur immediately saw that he had damaged his own cause.

"You had better sleep upon my proposition, Mr. Arthur," said Madeline, from the threshold. "If you pine for liberty, send for me. And don't think, for a moment, that I shall allow you to go free without taking the necessary precautions to insure myself against any trouble you might desire to make me. Adieu, Mr. Arthur." And she swept from the room.

John Arthur stood for many minutes in the same place and attitude. When his anger would permit him, he began to wonder. She had come and gone, and how much the wiser was he? Where had she been all these months? Why had she allowed them to think her dead? Who were her friends, for friends she must have found? Why had her presence in the house, if she had been here, been kept from him? How had she gained the ascendancy over every one in that house? He thought so long and intensely that he started up, at last, almost beginning to fear that he was becoming mad.

When Dr. Le Guise again came into his presence, he began to question him. But it was labour lost. Dr. Le Guise would not admit that he was a sane man. Dr. Le Guise knew nothing, absolutely nothing, outside the range of his professional duties. He was sorry for his patient; very sorry. He assumed to take all assertions on the part of Mr. Arthur as so many fresh evidences of insanity.

He was very grave, was Dr. Le Guise, but not to be moved. In fact, the prisoner fancied that he could observe in the doctor's tone, manner and countenance, an unusual degree of complacency, and relish for his position and authority. And the prisoner was right. The reason for the doctor's placidity of manner was simply this:

Madeline on leaving the rooms of the west wing, had encountered the worthy "doctor" just at the turn of the passage, and she had paused, saying:

"Dr. Le Guise, you are right about my unfortunate step-father. He is quite mad, and really a dangerous charge. An ordinary fee is too little to offer you, considering what you have undertaken. I don't know what terms my step-mamma has made with you, but I will volunteer to double her price. You will be amply remunerated, and must consider the house and everything in it at your disposal, so long as you keep your patient safe, and do not permit him to do any mischief."

The astute Professor had taken in the full meaning of her words, which served to quiet the fears that had haunted him since the advent of Miss Payne; fears that the young lady would prove to be an enemy, and one keen enough to fathom the secret they were keeping hidden in the west wing.

He had seen that, for some reason, neither Cora nor Davlin dared, or did, oppose her. Now he fancied he understood the reason; it was because they did not fear her, for her interests were in common with theirs.

"He is certainly a dangerous man," said the Professor, gravely; "I will obey your instructions to the letter."

CHAPTER XL.

DAVLIN'S "POINTS."

MADELINE having left the morning-room, accompanied by the too observant Professor, Lucian saw at once his opportunity for a few words with Cora. Without too great an appearance of haste, he moved across the room, pausing before the fire, in front of which Miss Arthur was seated, and addressing to her a few careless words. Then he glanced at Percy, who sat at the most remote corner of the room, assuming to be much interested in some geological specimens in a little cabinet.

Cora divined his attention. She knew, too, this was the very best place for an interview, which she desired to make a brief one, being somewhat afraid of committing herself if she allowed him to ask too many questions. So she moved over to the window, and seated herself in a low chair.

She had decided upon her own present course of action. She would play her part well while she remained at Oakley, and she would escape from it as soon as she had succeeded in blinding the eyes of her jailers, for she mentally acknowledged them as such.

When Davlin at length crossed the room, and dropped carelessly down in the chair at her side, she lifted her eyes to his, and said, inquiringly: "Well?"

He looked at her keenly for a moment. Then, not to lose any time by useless words, came straight at the point.

"Time's precious, Co. We can't attract attention by a long dialogue, and yet we must talk things over. When can I find you alone?"

"Not at all for a day or two."

"Why not?" elevating his eyebrows.

Cora rested her head upon her hand in such a way as to conceal from those at the opposite end of the room, the expression of her face, and said:

"Because I want to be sure that we can talk without being observed. Miss Payne seems very friendly, and has given me her maid because, she says, an invalid needs waiting on, and she sleeps in my dressing-room. I don't want to excite suspicion by sending her away, in order to admit you, and, I don't see that there is much to be said."

Lucian seemed weighing her words for a moment. Then he asked: "What do you make of Miss Payne?"

"What do you make of her?" she retorted, quickly.

"Nothing, as yet."

"No more do I."

Another brief silence, and then he asked "Do you think there is any immediat danger, for us?"

"As how?"

"From him, Arthur."

Now came Cora's grand coup. Sh felt pretty sure that Lucian knew of he interview with Madeline, and believed tha she would be telling him no news when sh said:

"Listen! She went with me to my room last night, and she asked a gooc many questions about him. And I am sure of this: she is no friend to him, and if she sees no reason for suspecting any of us, she won't trouble herself about him. She told me that she ran away from home because she had been oppressed by him, and that his attempt to marry her off, in order to put money in his own pocket, was only one among many of the things she had endured at his hands. Of one thing I am sure, the old man may be a stumbling-block to us, but he is an object of positive hatred to her.'

Cora uttered this combination of truth and falsehood without the least compunction. If she could have warned him of the danger hanging over them without jeopardising herself, she would have done so. But that, she knew was impossible.

He had planned this "game" which now bade fair to be such an utter failure, and, if anyone must suffer, why, let it be him. And then, too, she reasoned, she had not gathered from the words of Madeline that she suspected Mr. Davlin of duplicity of any kind. As for the Professor, Cora cared little what became of him. She could gain nothing and might, doubtless would lose much by warning him.

Lastly, Cora assured herself that were their positions reversed, and Lucian the one who saw that his own safety lay in leaving her to her fate, he would not scruple to make her his scapegoat. And in this she was quite right.

Again the man seemed to puzzle over some knotty, mental question. Then he arose, and leaning against the window

frame in a favourite attitude, glanced across at Percy and the spinster as he asked, slowly: "Did she say anything about me?"

Cora looked up in genuine surprise. "About you? No; why should she?"

"I mean," he said, "did she say anything to cause you to think that she suspected us?"

"No," shortly, "why should she? She never saw either of us until yesterday."

"What do you think brought her back here just now?"

"It's easy enough to see why she came back. She has heard of the insanity of Mr. Arthur, and has come, as she said, to take possession of her own."

Another pause, then Cora said: "Is the Professor 'up' to anything new."

"No."

"Then don't let him take the alarm. It would hurt us. We can't run now, and I don't think we have much to fear. We will lose the money—that's all."

Lucian looked out upon the evergreens and gravelled walks of Oakley, and said, under his breath, "Will we?"

Then he turned upon his heel and sauntered out of the room.

The question that was then uppermost in his mind, the question that had been since the first shock of her reappearance had given him time to think, was, 'why had Madeline returned to Oakley?'

Was it, as she alleged, because she had changed her mind, and wanted to be mistress of her own? Or was it because he was there? If he could convince himself that the latter reason was the true one, then he would know how to act.

She had kept herself informed of affairs at Oakley. Then she must have known of the fact that the so-called brother of John Arthur's wife was Lucian Davlin. She must have known that. Of course she knew it. Did not her manner on the evening of her arrival prove that? Not for one instant did she lose her self-possession. Had his presence been unexpected, she could hardly have restrained every sign of emotion, of recognition. Clearly, she was prepared for their meeting.

Ah! now he was getting at things. If she came to Oakley, knowing him to be established there as a member of the family, she came *expecting* to meet him. She was not afraid of him, then. She was not averse to meeting him. Perhaps—he began to think it highly probable—she came solely to meet him. If so, did she come for love, or—for revenge?

If she came for revenge why did she not denounce him? But no, she would hardly do that. What woman would? But she might have assumed toward him a hostile attitude.

Finally, his masculine vanity helped him to a conclusion. A woman seldom forgets her first love so easily, and he could meet her so differently now. She had *not* forgotten her love for him. He could win it back, and her forgiveness with it. And then—then, if he could but manage Cora, what would hinder him from marrying her, and being in clover ever after! He was tired of roving, they could go to the city, he need not give up gaming, and—he really loved the girl, had loved her since the day she had escaped from his snare.

Having arrived at this stage in his day-dream, he began to feel buoyant. And when he heard from the Professor the result of Madeline's visit to her step-father, his complacency was at high tide.

"It's all in a nutshell to me," said the Professor, as they smoked their confidential cigars in the privacy of Lucian's own room. "Mind, I don't suppose she is up to our game; she can't be, you know; but she *is* pretty thoroughly convinced that what she thinks is his insanity, is but temporary."

"How do you know that?" interrupted Lucian, sharply.

"Not from anything *she* said; I had very few words with her. But look here, Davlin, isn't this a clear case enough? When I went up to see the old fool, after their interview, I find him in a paroxysm

of rage. Of course he makes his complaint; his *ravings* informed me of this: She told him that she did not really think him very crazy herself, but two doctors *did*, and she didn't feel called to dispute them. She told him that he could not prove himself sane in any court in America; and that he, being insane, was dead in law; and she was going to choose another guardian."

Lucian Davlin fairly bounded from the chair. "That's it!" he ejaculated under his breath.

"Then," pursues the Professor, puffing away tranquilly, "she comes straight from this interview and meets me, to whom she says that, 'It is a most deplorable and dangerous case; that he is really liable to attack me or Henry at any moment; that I must take every precaution and guard against his sudden attack, even if I were forced to confine him still more closely; and that she had suspected him of partial insanity long ago.' Now, what do you think of that?"

Precisely what he thought it was not Mr. Davlin's intention to tell. One idea, however, he expressed promptly enough: "I think," he said, leaning a little forward and looking full at his companion, "that you had better take the advice of Miss Payne. Confine him close, the closer the better; but don't drug him any more at present!"

The Professor nodded serenely as he said: "Right, quite right. Just what I was about to suggest."

He might have added that he had resolved upon taking the course indicated, even if the suggestion had not been made. "The young lady holds the winning cards," he had assured himself. "I will take her orders before I get myself in too deep!" His "too deep" meant deep as the grave.

And now Lucian had a new subject for conjecture. If Miss Payne proposed to appoint for herself a guardian, who would she select? Who had been caring for her during all these months? Was it man or woman?

The only information she had volunteered had been implied rather than spoken. In answer to Miss Arthur's rather abrupt query at the breakfast table as to how she had managed to prosper so well in a strange city where she had no friends, the girl had replied, with a little laugh:

"I suppose it has never occurred to either yourself or Mr. Arthur that I might have found out some of my mother's friends. I was put in possession of my mother's journal on the very day that I ran away from Oakley. I am not so friendless as you may think."

Lucian was again puzzled, but knowing the girl as he did, he was not prepared to believe that a guardian, in the form of a lover, would appear. He was now convinced that Cora, whom at first he had somewhat doubted, was not for some unknown reason attempting to deceive him.

The Professor s story had corroborated hers, and given him, as he expressed it, "a fresh point" in his game. But alas for Lucian! Every fancied discovery only beguiled him farther and farther from the truth, and rendered him more and more blind to the chains that were being forged about him.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DAYS PASS BY.

SEVERAL days passed and still Lucian Davlin had not found the much wished for opportunity to converse with Madeline. Neither had he been able to find Cora alone. Visit her room when he would, there was the burly waiting-maid. Finally Cora had warned him, with some asperity, that his "actions looked rather suspicious," and then he obeyed her gentle hint and remained aloof.

Two days after the bestowal of Strong, the maid, upon the not-too-grateful Cora, an angular, grenadier-looking female presented herself at the servants' entrance, announcing that she was "the new maid;"

and she was installed as high priestess of Madeline's apartments without loss of time.

The servants below stairs made comments, as servants will. Even Miss Arthur, Percy and Davlin agreed in calling the two maids, respectively, "Grenadier" and "Griffin."

But only Cora knew that the two were better learned in the art of spying than in matters of the toilet. She knew herself to be under continual surveillance. Above stairs or below, Madeline or Hagar, Strong or Joliffe were not far away. And yet she had not abandoned her plan of escaping.

One morning, Cora, looking from the window of her dressing room, saw two men moving about in the grounds below. Upon commenting upon their presence there, Strong had answered, readily:

"Yes, madame, Joliffe tells me that they are here to sink a well. Miss Payne has decided to have a fountain among those cedar trees, and they are to go to work immediately."

"But a well in winter! They can't dig."

"They don't dig; they bore. It's to be a fountain, madame."

But in spite of the "fountain" explanation, Cora knew that the house was guarded from without as well as from within.

"It's no use to warn Lucian, or anybody, now," she thought. "It would only get us all into worse trouble."

But still she did not abandon the thoughts of her own escape.

And now began a time of trial for poor Ellen Arthur. Madeline Payne, after studiously ignoring the two men for some days, began to unbend. She commenced by conversing with Percy, listening to his slow and stately sentences, smiling her approval, and completely captivating that susceptible gentleman. Then, by degrees, she drew Lucian into the conversation, and smiled upon and listened to him.

All this Cora observed, wondering what the girl was trying to do; while the spinster looked on in untold agony, fearful lest this fair sorceress should avenge herself for some of her childish grievances by robbing her of her lover.

Meanwhile Lucian Davlin interpreted all this in his own favour. "She is proud and still resentful," he thought. "And she is using Percy as a medium of approach to me."

At last Lucian, growing impatient, resorted to an old, old trick. He watched his opportunity, and one evening, as Madeline was following Cora from the drawing-room, the door or which he was holding open for their exit, he pushed into her hand a small scrap of paper.

She would have dropped it; her first impulse was to do so, but Cora turned as her hand was about to loosen its clasp upon the fragment. So she passed on, carrying it with her to her own room. There she opened it and read these penciled words:

For God's sake do not torture me longer. You have condemned me without a hearing. Be as merciful as you are strong and lovely. At least let me see you alone, when I can plead for myself.

Half an hour later, Hagar tapped at his door. When he opened it, she put in his hand a bit of paper, on which were these faintly-pencilled lines:

If you desire my friendship, you must date our acquaintance from this week. You never knew me in the past.

"And she is right," muttered he; "the Madeline Payne of last summer, and the Madeline Payne of now, are to each other as the chrysalis to the butterfly, in beauty; as the kitten to the panther, in spirit; as the babe to the woman, in mind. That Madeline pleased me; this one, I love."

So he accepted the position, and did not give up striving to draw from her some special word, or look, or tone, that he need not feel belonged as much to Percy as to himself.

Meantime Percy was revolving various things in his learned head.

He had been, as a matter of course, deeply impressed with her beauty, and he had been much puzzled as well.

Having witnessed her arrival, he had fully expected rebellion from Cora, for Cora was not the woman to be barred out from a prospective fortune and make no sign. But there was no war, and no indications of battle. Cora and her heiress were wonderfully friendly. Mr. Percy could not understand it.

The manner of Davlin toward him had not changed in the least, remaining as studiously polite as when he was so cordially invited to take up his abode under the hospitable roof of Oakley.

That of Cora was decidedly different. While before she addressed him with a sort of conciliating courtesy, and had seemed desirous of furthering his plans and hastening on his marriage with Miss Arthur, she now manifested an almost contemptuous indifference, not only to himself, but to his *fiance*.

True to her nature, Cora was gathering up what gleams of satisfaction she could. When she had become assured that it was not Percy who held possession of her stolen papers, and that the girl in whose hands they were was more his enemy than hers, she rejoiced in his discomfiture to come. Seeing that it was no longer necessary to propitiate her enemy, she indulged in the luxury of acting out her hatred, when she could without betraying to Davlin this change, which might require an explanation.

That some sort of understanding existed between Miss Payne and Cora, Percy instantly surmised, and every day confirmed the belief. That Miss Payne held the power, he also believed. So believing, he began to wonder if it were not better to "be off with the old love," and seek to win the heiress; for the vanity of Mr. Percy inspired him to believe that it would not be a hopeless task. He had heard, however, of that person who, "between two stools," fell to the ground, and he was careful not to reveal to Miss Arthur the laxity of his affections.

And so the days moved on.

Percy dividing his attention between his *fiance* and Miss Payne; studying the latter, and closely watching Davlin and Cora.

That last named lady smiling and lounging below stairs, sulking and smoking above and always under surveillence.

Davlin, having assured Cora that he was acting from motives politic, paying open court to Madeline,

That young lady calmly acting her part, thoroughly understanding and heartily despising them all.

John Arthur alternately raging and sulking, obdurately refusing to accede to his step-daughter's terms, and vowing to escape and wreak vengeance upon every one of them.

"Dr. Le Guise," calm as a Summer morning, and taking more real ease and comfort than all the others combined.

Hagar watchful and anxious.

The two new maids making themselves popular in the kitchen, and "sleeping with their eyes open."

And still no clue by which Madeline and her efficient *aides de camp* could unravel the web of doubt that still clung about, and kept a prisoner, the long-suffering Philip Girard.

CHAPTER XLII.

A STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

AFTER some days of outward calm, came a ripple upon the surface of events.

It had been a dull, cloudy day, with occasional gusts of wind and rain; wind that chilled to the very marrow, and rain that froze as it fell.

The three men, Davlin, Percy and the Professor, had been constrained to abandon their customary morning walk, with cigar accompaniment, up and down the terrace. And the well-borers had been obliged to stop their work.

Mrs. Arthur had kept her room and her bed all day long, afflicted by a raging

toothache. Strong was kept at her side, almost constantly applying hot water, laudanum and various other local applications. As the day advanced, the sufferer seemed growing worse; and when Madeline came in to administer consolation, and see if the woman were really ill, Cora sent for Dr. Le Guise, vowing she would have the tooth out, and every other one in her head, if the pain did not stop. But when the Professor arrived, her courage failed her. She drew back at the sight of the formidable forceps, saying that she would "try and endure it a little longer; it seemed a bit easier just then."

All this Madeline noted. Retiring from the room she signaled to Strong to follow her out. "What do you think of her?" questioned Madeline of the latter, as the door closed between them and Cora.

Strong looked dubious. "I really don't know what to think, Miss Payne," she said. "If it is shamming, it is the best I ever saw."

"True," answered Madeline; "I am at a loss. You had better apply some test, Strong, and—keep all your medicines out of her reach. Don't let her get any laudanum, or anything; and presently report to me. She must not be left alone, however; when I send Joliffe in, do you come to me."

Madeline passed on to her own room, and Strong returned to her patient.

When Joliffe went to her relief, Strong presented herself before Madeline saying: "I can't think she is shamming, Miss Payne. I suggested a mustard blister, and she never made a murmur. I put it on awful strong, and she declared that it was nothing to the pain. When I took it off, her cheek was red as flannel, and she wanted it put on again. She says it relieves her, and thinks if the pain don't come back she will sleep. I made sure of the bottles all the same," added Strong. "I have used a lot of chloroform on her, but of course some would evaporate." And she held up to view a half-filled chloroform vial.

She was right; full half an ounce had "evaporated," during the brief minute when she had stood in the hall to confer with Madeline.

Altogether, Strong had a hard day.

Cora kept her continually on her feet. The blinds must be opened, and shut again every fifteen minutes. The room was too hot, and the fire must be smothered. Then it was too cold, and the fire must be stimulated to a blaze. And no one could wait upon her but Strong.

As night came on, the paroxysms of pain returned in full force, and Strong was implored once more to apply the soothing mustard.

When Madeline looked in at ten o'clock, Cora was groaning in misery, and Strong was applying a blister. When she again looked in, an hour later, the invalid, with blistered face and fevered eyes, feebly declared herself a "trifle easier," and Strong was bathing her head with *eau de Cologne*.

Madeline soon retired to her room, and her couch. But for full half an hour longer, Cora kept the now yawning Strong at her side. Then she said:

"Go now and get some rest, Strong. Leave the mustard on my face, and then I think I can sleep. I am getting drowsy now."

Strong replaced the mustard, and raked up the fire. Then she looked carefully to the fastenings of the doors, and returned to the bedside. Already her mistress was in a heavy slumber.

Putting in her pockets the keys of both doors, Strong retired to the dressing-room and, loosening her garments, threw herself down wearily upon a couch, and was soon sleeping the sleep of the just, and breathing heavily.

For some moments after the loud breathing told that her maid was asleep, Cora lay quietly, but with eyes wide open. Then she stirred, making a slight noise, but the heavy breathing continued as before.

Cora now raised herself up on her elbow and again listened. Still the heavy breathing. Again she moved audibly, at the same time calling softly: "Strong!"

But Strong slumbered on.

Quickly snatching the bandages from her much enduring face, Cora sprang lightly from the bed. Taking something from under her pillows, she stole noiselessly into the dressing-room and up to the couch of the sleeping Strong. In another instant there was a pungent odour in the room, and something white and moist lay over the musical proboscis of the slumbering giantess.

In five minutes more, Cora Arthur stood arrayed in a dark travelling suit, with a pair of walking-boots in one hand, and the key of her chamber door in the other. Swiftly and silently as a professional house-breaker, she opened the door and passed out, closing it quietly behind her.

Like a shadow she glided down the now unlighted stairway, and through the dark and silent hall, in the direction of the dining-room. Turning to the left, she paused before a side door, the very door through which Madeline had escaped on a certain eventful June night, and noiselessly undid the fastenings. In another moment she was outside, and the door had closed behind her.

She drew a long breath of relief, and sat down to put on her shoes. Her escape was well-timed; the train for the city, the midnight express, was due in twenty minutes. Strong would hardly waken before that time, and then—she would be flying across the country at the heels of the iron horse.

Rising to her feet, she took one step in the darkness—only one. Then a light suddenly flashed before her eyes, a heavy hand grasped her arm, and a gruff voice said: "This is a bad night for ladies to be abroad. You had better go back, ma'am!"

Cora made a desperate effort to free herself, but the hand held her as in a vice, and the bull's eye of the dark lantern flashed in her face as the speaker continued:

"Yes, you are the identical one I am looking for. Got a red face—toothache didn't make you a trifle lightheaded, did it? Come, turn about, quick!"

And Cora knew that Madeline Payne had not been as blind as she had seemed. It was useless to struggle, useless to protest. The strong hand pushed her toward the entrance. The man gripped the lantern in his teeth, while he opened the door, and pushing her through, followed after. Closing the door again, and never once releasing his hold upon her, he forced her unwilling feet to retrace their steps, saying, as they ascended the stairs:

"Show the way to your own room, if you don't want me to rouse the house."

Quivering with rage, Cora pointed to the door, and was immediately ushered, with more force than politeness, back into her own dressing-room and the presence of her still insensible maid.

"Now, then," said her tormentor, where is Miss Payne's room? No nonsense, mind; I'm not a flat."

Cora, thoroughly convinced of the truth of this statement, sullenly directed him to Madeline's door.

"Stand where you are," was the next command of the man; "it might jar your tooth to move."

And Cora stood where he had left her, while he aroused Miss Payne and communicated to her the news of the night's exploit.

In a very few moments Joliffe appeared, and without so much as casting a glance at Cora, set herself to arouse the stupefied Strong—a feat which was soon accomplished, for the woman had nearly exhausted the effects of her sleeping potion. A moment later, and Madeline appeared upon the threshold. After surveying the scene in silence for an instant, she entered the room, closed the door, and said with a laugh that set Cora's blood boiling: "So you were tired of our society, and fancied that you could outwit me? Undeceive yourself, madame; it is not in your power to escape from my hands, and whatever fate I choose to adjudge you."

Then turning to the man, she said:

"You have done well, Morris; this kind of work you will find more profitable than well-boring. You may go now."

The man bowed respectfully, and silently quitted the room.

Then Madeline addressed Joliffe: "You will stay here the remainder of the night. Let Strong sleep; she is not to blame for permitting her charge to escape, and she will be more wary in future."

Then turning again to Cora, who had flung herself in a chair and sat gazing from one to the other in sullen silence, she said, with a smile on her lips: "You should not work against your own interests, Mrs. Arthur. Had you succeeded in escaping on the midnight express, who, think you, would have been summoned to meet you on your arrival in the city?"

"Doubtless an officer," replied the woman, doggedly. "I might have known you for a sleuth hound who would guard every avenue."

"Thanks; you do me honour. I should not have summoned an officer, however; there is someone else waiting anxiously to welcome you there."

"Indeed," sarcastically; "who?"

"*Old Verage.*"

Cora started up in her chair. "For God's sake, *what* are you?"

"A witch," said the girl, demurely. "I am as old as the world, and can fly through the air on a broomstick, so don't think to escape me again, step-mamma. I trust you will enjoy your brief repose, for it will soon be morning, and if I don't see your fair face at the breakfast table, I shall not be content."

Cora put two fingers to her blistered cheek, saying: "You can't ask me to come down with this face."

"True, I can't. Good-night, step-mamma; it would have been better if you had let the doctor pull that tooth."

And Miss Payne swept away, leaving the would-be fugitive to her own reflections.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE DOCTOR'S WOOING.

MRS. RALSTON had become to Olive Girard as one of the family. There was a strange affinity between the two women, who had known so much of sorrow, so many, dark, dark days. As yet, however, there was not entire confidence. Mrs. Ralston knew nothing of the movements then on foot to liberate the husband of her hostess; and Olive knew no more of Mrs. Ralston's past than had been communicated by Claire, which was in reality but very little.

Dr. Vaughan had become an ardent admirer of the grave, sweet, pale lady, who had, in her turn, conceived a very earnest admiration for him.

Always a close student of the human countenance, Mrs. Ralston had not been long reading in the face of the young man his regard for Claire Keith. Having discovered this, she studied him still more attentively, coming, at last, to the conclusion that he was worthy of her beloved Claire.

But Claire appeared ever under a strange restraint in the presence of Dr. Vaughan. She seemed always to endeavour to keep either her sister or her friend at her side, as if she found herself more at ease while in their proximity. Evidently she was keeping close guard over herself. And just as evidently she was glad to be in the presence of Clarence Vaughan when supported by her sister and friend, and safe from a *tête-à-tête*.

Mrs. Ralston was really troubled by this apparent misunderstanding, or whatever it might be, that rendered Claire less cordial towards Dr. Vaughan than she would have been to one who was only a friend, and far less worthy of friendship. She mentally resolved, when a fitting opportunity should occur, to endeavour to win the confidence of the girl, for she saw that two natures, formed to love each other, were drifting apart, with no prospect of a better understanding. And that opportunity came sooner than she had expected.

One day, a day destined to be always remembered by the chief actors in our strange drama, Mrs. Ralston seated herself at a davenport in Mrs. Girard's pretty library to write a letter to Mr. Lord. The promptness and energy of that good man had completely baffled the acute detective, and the danger which Mrs. Ralston had so much feared, the danger of being discovered by her worthless husband, was now past.

She had entered the library through the drawing-room and, both rooms being untenanted, had left the door of communication between them half open.

Sitting thus, she heard the door of the drawing-room open, and the rustle of feminine garments betokened the entrance of one of her friends. Presently soft ripples of music fell upon her ear, and she knew that it was Claire who was now at the piano, playing dreamily, softly, as if half fearful of awakening some beloved sleeper.

After a few moments, the ripple changed to a plaintive minor accompaniment, that had in it an undertone as of far-off winds and waves. Then the full, clear voice of the girl rang out in that most beautiful of songs, which alone should make famous the genius of Jean Ingelow and Virginie Gabriel:

"When sparrows build and the leaves break forth,
My old sorrow wakes and cries."

The singer sang on, all unconscious that two listeners were noting the passion and pain in her voice:

'How could I tell I could love thee to-day,
When that day I held not dear?
How could I know I should love thee, away,
When I did not love thee near?"

As the last note died away in sorrowful vibrations, Mrs. Ralston, in the library, was conscious of tears trickling down her cheek.

At the same moment there was a discordant crash among the piano keys, and Claire's voice was saying, almost angrily:

"Dr. Vaughan! how came you here? How dared you —"

There was a suspicious tremour in her voice, and she stopped speaking, as if too proud to show how very much she had been thrown off her guard.

"Forgive me, Miss Keith," the deep voice of Clarence Vaughan responded: "Believe me, I did not intend my presence as an impertinence. Your servant admitted me, and I thought it not wrong to enter unannounced, although I hardly hoped to find you alone. Surely you do not blame me for my silence while you sang?"

Claire made no reply. She was strongly tempted to fly and let Clarence Vaughan think what he would. But before she could stir, he had moved a step nearer and was looking straight down in her eyes.

"Claire," he said, in tones of reverential tenderness, "I have waited for the time to come when I might say to you what you must let me say now. You have seemed to avoid me of late; I cannot guess why. And to-day, as I listened to your song, a new thought, a new fear has entered my mind. Claire, tell me, have you read the love that has been in my heart since I first saw your face, and have you sought to shun me because you love another?"

While he was uttering this speech, Claire Keith had regained her self-command, and her answer now came low and clear: "Dr. Vaughan, you have not guessed aright. I have not avoided you because I love another."

"Claire, nature did not make you an actress. There was love in your voice when you sang that song!"

"Thank you," coolly; "I have been taught to sing with expression."

"Claire, Claire Keith, I beg you answer me truly; do you really dislike me? You say you do not love another; could you learn to love me?"

No answer.

"Tell me, Claire, do you not know how deeply I love you?"

Silence.

"Claire, Claire, speak to me. End this suspense. Will you not try to love me?"

She moved away from him, and avoiding his eyes, answered in an odd, hard voice: "No, Dr. Vaughan, I will not try to love you."

His next words were uttered almost tremulously, Ah! I understand. I have displeased you; tell me how."

"You have never displeased me. You are goodness itself. Let me pass, Doctor Vaughan; I must not listen to you."

"Must not? Then you do avoid me?"

"Yes," almost inaudibly.

"Why?" stepping before her and cutting off her retreat.

"I won't tell you. Yes, I will, too. Oh, how blind you are! How can you love me when—when there is someone better, better a thousand times, and braver, too. Someone whose life needs your love, because it has been so loveless always. I won't love you. I won't listen to you. If you want me to be your friend, make the life that is giving its best to others, as happy as it deserves to be. And—don't ever talk—like this—to me again."

Before he could open his lips, or put out a hand to detain her, she had rushed from the room.

Clarence Vaughan gazed after the flying form in speechless grief and amazement.

Then flinging himself into a chair, he bowed his head upon his hands in sorrowful meditation. Sitting thus he did not perceive the approach of someone, who laid a hand lightly upon his bowed head, murmuring: "Blind! blind! blind!"

Starting up, he saw the face of Mrs. Ralston bending toward him and wearing an expression of mingled compassion and amusement.

"Forgive me," she said, her countenance resuming her usual gravity. I was in the library and heard all. I listened wilfully, too, for I have been observing you and Claire, and I want to help you."

Clarence dropped disconsolately back in his chair. "If you have heard all," he said, "you know that it is useless to try to help me."

Mrs. Ralston laughed outright. "If you were not blind you would not need my help," she said. "As it is, you do."

"Mrs. Ralston, what do you mean?"

"I mean that your battle is half won. If you will explain to me one half her words, I will explain to you the other half."

"You are laughing at me," he said wearily. "What can you explain?"

"That ridiculous girl commanded you to bestow your love upon some more worthy object; someone who was living for others; or some such words. Whom did she mean, may I ask?"

He started up as if inspired by a new thought. "I see!" he exclaimed; "She must have meant—a very dear friend of hers."

He could not say the name that was in his thought. It would sound like egotism.

"That is sufficient," said the lady. "Now, I am going to betray Claire, as she has betrayed this other one. You foolish fellow, can't you see that the child loves you and is striving to do a Quixotic thing by giving you up to her friend? Think over her words and manner, and don't take her at her bidding. If this other, to whom Claire commands you to turn, is a true woman, she would not thank you for the offer of a preoccupied heart."

"She is a true woman," said Clarence, emphatically. "And as dear to me as a sister could be, but —"

"Then let her be a sister still," said Mrs. Ralston, quietly. "And don't lose any time in persuading Claire that she is wronging herself as you! and that you would be wronging still more this friend whom you both love, were you to offer her so pitiful a thing as a hand without a heart. She is a true woman, you say. If so, she would never forgive that. Believe me, Doctor Vaughan, there are even worse depths of sorrow than to have loved worthily—and lost."

Mrs. Ralston turned and went softly from the room.

For a few moments, Clarence Vaughan stood wrapped in thought. Then his face became illuminated as he said, half aloud: "What a fool I have been, that I should have so misunderstood that dear girl! Oh, I can be patient now, and bide my time."

And now his reverie was broken in upon by Olive, who entered hurriedly, saying: "Doctor Vaughan, are you here alone? I thought Claire was with you."

He made no answer to this remark, but said, as he took her proffered hand: "I ran down to tell you that I have taken the detectives off. Jarvis is still in our pay, in case of emergency. He has sent his report to Davlin, and a scant one it was. Of course, Davlin is glad to have him withdraw; that is, if he knows, as he must, that the papers are not in Percy's hands."

"Then all depends upon Madeline now?"

"All depends upon Madeline."

"Poor Philip," sighed Olive. "What would he say if he knew that his fate rests in the hands of a mere girl?"

"If he knew of that 'mere girl' what we know, he would say that his fate could not rest in better hands. No man ever had a more efficient champion, nor one half so brave and beautiful."

They had not dared to tell Philip of the hope that was daily growing stronger in their hearts; if they failed, he should be thrust back into no gulf of black darkness because they had cheated him with a false hope.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A FRESH COMPLICATION.

On leaving so abruptly the companionship of Dr. Vaughan, Claire rushed straight to her room. Closing and locking the door, she flung herself upon a couch and indulged in a hearty cry. She was at once happy and sorry, angry and pleased. Presently, Claire sat up and began to review things more calmly.

"What a wretched little dunce I am!" she soliloquized. "And what must he think of me! Well!" with a little sigh "the worse his opinion of me, the better for Madeline. And here I am this minute in spite of myself, actually rejoicing in my heart because he has not done the very thing I have resolved that he should do. But he never will know it. Neither shall any one else. I won't give him another chance to talk to me: no, not if I have to take to my heels ten times a day. It's only right that I should give him up; I, indeed, who fancied myself in love with a white-handed, yellow-haired villain."

At this point in her meditations, some one rapped softly at her door.

"Claire, dear," said a soft voice, "open your door; I want to come in."

It was Mrs. Ralston, and Claire advanced slowly and turned the key in the lock.

"I—I thought it was somebody else," she said, hypocritically. "Come in, Mrs. Ralston."

Thus invited, the lady entered. Without making a comment on the disturbed appearance of her young friend, she crossed to the window, and sitting down in a cosy dressing-chair, said: "Come directly here, young lady, and sit down on that ottoman."

Looking somewhat surprised, the girl obeyed.

"Claire, my child, I have a confession to make. I was in the library while you sang: 'When sparrows build.'"

The girl's cheek flushed and then paled; but she made no answer.

"And," pursued Mrs. Ralston, "I heard more than your song."

No reply.

"And more than your words!"

"More than—my—my words?"

"Yes; I heard your heart's secret."

Claire's face drooped. "What do you mean?" she asked, deprecatingly.

"My darling, I mean that your heart spoke through your voice, and it belied your words. Why did you deny your love for so noble a man?"

Claire raised her head. "I didn't!" she said, sullenly, as if driven to bay.

"No," smiled Mrs. Ralston. "You were a wily little serpent. But you deceived him."

"I don't care," doggedly.

"Now you are telling a fib!"

"Well, I am not sorry, then," getting hold of her monitor's hand. "Why do you turn against poor me, when I am trying to do my duty?"

"Because you are not doing your duty."

"Yes, I am; indeed, I am. You don't know."

"Then tell me, and let me be your friend and adviser."

"But you can't advise," objected Claire, "because you don't know the—the other one."

"Well, I do know you."

"There it is!" burst forth the champion of the absent. "You know me, but you don't know what a worthless, unattractive little imp I am compared to her. You don't know her, but you shall! And when you do, poor me will have to take a seat lower down in the tabernacle of your affections."

"I wonder if this 'other' would so readily resign her lover to you?" she said.

"Would she!" flashed Claire. "Would she *not?* *Has* she not? Ah, if you knew her, you would never say that!" Then suddenly capturing the other hand of the lady, she said, in quieter but very grave tones: "Can you listen to a long story, Mrs. Ralston; rather to several stories combined in one? I am going to tell you what I have so much wanted you to know—the story of Madeline Payne."

Mrs. Ralston expressed her more than willingness to hear all that Claire had to tell, and the girl settled down comfortably on the ottoman at the feet of her friend, and began at the beginning. It was indeed a long story, for Claire omitted nothing. As she told how Madeline had exposed to her the baseness of Percy, Mrs. Ralston started up, her face pale as death, and then sank back in her chair.

"Percy!" she cried. "What—what is his other name?"

Claire stared at her in amazement. "What is it, Mrs. Ralston—you are ill?"

"No," almost gasped the lady; "tell me—his name."

"I did not intend to speak his name," Claire said, slowly. "It is Edward Percy."

Mrs. Ralston was on her feet in an instant, her face flushing with excitement. "Come with me!" she almost shrieked. "Quick! to my room."

Wondering vaguely, Claire followed.

Mrs. Ralston almost flew to her apartment. She flung open the door, and in an instant was on her knees beside a trunk, opening trays and searching for something eagerly.

"Look!" she cried, suddenly, thrusting out something toward Claire; something from which she averted her own face. "Look, did you ever see that face?"

The girl gave one glance and uttered a sharp cry. It was a miniature painted on ivory; painted years ago, but she knew it only too well.

Mrs. Ralston regained her feet, trembling so that she could scarcely stand.

"Where did you get it?" cried Claire.

"It is he; Edward Percy!"

Mrs. Ralston started forward and took the picture from her hand. "*It is my husband!*" she whispered.

With the words on her lips, she fel heavily to the floor, in a dead faint.

When Mrs. Ralston awoke to consciousness, she was lying upon her bed, with Dr. Vaughan bending over her, Olive standing near, and Claire a little aloof, looking pale and anxious. Her first thought was of the picture.

"Where is it?" she murmured, addressing Claire, who stepped forward eagerly.

"It is here, dear Mrs. Ralston," said Claire. "I caught it from your hand after you fell. I thought—" And then she hesitated.

"I understand," she said, looking at the girl fixedly. "Drop it from your hand.

Claire; drop it *there*," pointing to the grate. "It has done its work; we need never look upon it again."

Claire obeyed her silently. For the second time she had consigned to the flames the pictured face of Edward Percy.

To the surprise of the three who had so lately seen her coming slowly back from the swoon, so like death, Mrs. Ralston raised herself to a sitting posture, and then slowly arose from the bed and stood upright before them, and there was a flush on her cheek, and a light in her eyes that was new to that usually pale, sad face.

"Dear friends," she said, turning toward Clarence and Olive, who had been watching the burning of the picture with surprised and somewhat curious eyes, "I am quite recovered; and I want to think. Will you please leave me alone, quite alone, for a little while?"

Olive, Claire and Clarence went slowly and silently down to the drawing-room, Claire keeping very close to her sister and carefully avoiding the eyes of the young man. Seating herself beside Olive, Claire told, in her own way, all that she knew of the affair.

"I wanted to tell Mrs. Ralston of Madeline," she commenced, "and, not to omit anything, I told her poor Philip's story—all about the two men, and how the man, Percy, had appeared at Oakley as the lover of Miss Arthur. When I spoke his name, she ran to her room, almost dragging me with her, and——"

Suddenly she paused, horrified at a sudden thought. How could she explain to these two, who knew nothing of her "affair" with Edward Percy—who did not dream that she had ever seen his face—her ability to recognize the picture Mrs. Ralston had shown her?

"And?" interrogated Olive.

Clarence Vaughan saw that there was a reason for her hesitation, and while wondering what it could be, came to her rescue. "And fainted, of course," said he. "Well, she is better now, and perhaps we shall hear the conclusion of the mystery all in good time."

If she had dared, Claire would have given him a glance of gratitude. As it was, she only averted her face and felt herself a great hypocrite.

Doctor Vaughan was to remain for lunch; and while he talked quietly with Olive, Claire sat considering what they would say if they knew all. Presently her reverie was interrupted by the entrance of a servant, who said:

"Mrs. Ralston wishes Miss Keith to come to her.

Claire started up, and without a word to either her lover or her sister, hurried into the presence of her friend.

Mrs. Ralston advanced to meet the girl as she entered the room, and laying a hand upon her shoulder, said: "I understood you to say that your sister knows nothing of your acquaintance with that man. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"And you do not wish her to know?"

Claire hesitated. "I did not then think it was wrong to conceal it from her," she said, finally; "but now, if you think it best, I will try and tell her."

"But I do not think it best, my darling. I should have been convinced of his identity even had I not used the picture as a test. We will say nothing on that subject. And now, let us go down-stairs, for we have work to do!"

So saying, she led the way from the room and Claire followed, wondering how all this was to end.

CHAPTER XLV.

MRS. RALSTON'S STORY.

MRS. RALSTON entered the drawing-room with the light of a new and strong purpose shining in her eyes.

"Dear friends," she said, "sit near me and give me your attention. I have a story to tell, and I must not fatigue myself too much in the telling.

Without a word, Clarence moved forward an easy chair. As she seated herself, they all grouped about her with grave, expectant faces.

"I will make brief mention of myself," said the lady, sinking back in the luxurious chair with a slightly weary smile. "My life has never been a bright one. Married for the first time at the age of sixteen, my childhood was prematurely blighted, and my first real trouble feel upon me. It was not a happy marriage, and during the years of my first husband's life, I became more and more alienated from my relatives.

"When at last my husband died, I was thirty-six years old, and owing to ill-health, looked much older. But—I was wealthy. Then I met a man, younger than myself, and very handsome. I was weak and foolish. I believed in him and—married him. For four years he squandered my money and made my life a burden. At last, when I could endure no longer, and when, because he had inherited a fortune from some relative, I knew he would trouble himself little as to particulars, I caused him to believe me dead and buried.

"In reality I was in better health than usual, and while he was spending his new fortune and fancying me in the grave, I sailed for Europe. Before I departed, however, I saw him once more, myself unseen. It is this part of my story that will make your hearts glad."

She paused for a moment, and her three listeners gazed into each other's faces in silent wonder.

"I was going to Europe in company with some friends of Mrs. Lord who, of course, knew my secret. They twice postponed their time for sailing, and while waiting for them I went with my maid to a little mountain inn where travellers only came for a day, and then went on up the mountain.

"When I first arrived, the garrulous hostess made frequent mention of a hunting party that had gone up the mountain a few days before, stopping for dinner at the inn. I had been nearly two weeks in my mountain retreat when my maid came rushing in, one day, crying out that the hunting party had come back, and that one of their number had been badly hurt.

"Well, they brought the wounded man upstairs, and put him in the room that adjoined my sleeping apartment. The partitions between were of the sham kind—merely boards papered over. After he was settled, and the hum of many voices died away, I went into my little bedroom.

"I had scarcely entered when a voice from the next room, a man's voice, deep and full, although then subdued, startled me. I listened unthinkingly. 'There's no use in being weak about this business,' he said. 'Of course, you can make me trouble if you like, but hang me, Percy, I can't see how it will benefit you.'

"I see you are amazed, Doctor Vaughan, and Mrs. Girard is turning pale. You are beginning to guess the truth. Yes, it *was* Edward Percy who answered the first speaker, and—Edward Percy is my husband."

Again she paused for a moment. One could have heard a pin drop, so breathlessly eager, so silent, were her listeners. No one stirred or spoke, and she soon resumed:

"At the first sound of the other voice, I sank down sick with fear lest the man should, in some way, find me out. Sitting there, I heard him say, in the half fretful, wholly languid tones that I knew so well, 'It's easy to talk as you do; show me wherein it will be to my advantage, if you don't want me to knock down your pretty story. Curse you, what did you try to murder me for?'

"Then the other answered impatiently: 'I tell you, man, I was mistaken. I took you for him. Now listen: Neither you nor I love the fellow, and we each hold a trifle of power over the other. You can refute my statement, if you like, and accuse me of attacking you. In that case I may be imprisoned; but that won't keep you

above water long. If I am arrested for assault with intent to kill, you will soon find yourself in the next cell, accused of the still more serious crime of bigamy. On the other hand, if you let the matter rest as it is, and let *him* take his chances, I won't use those little documents I hold, which prove conclusively that you married a second wife while the first was living. Come, what do you say?'

"I remember their very words; not one syllable escaped me then, or has drifted from my mind since. And I could have predicted what the next words of my husband would be. I know his weakness so well, and I knew, too, then, for the first time, that my vague suspicions had been too true—that he had indeed been false to me, more than false.

"'I will do this,' said he, halting at every few words, 'if you will give me back the money you won from me up there, and will give me up those papers, we will not quarrel over this affair. We will let His Majesty take the consequences of your act, if you choose. I like him even less than I do you. But the money I must have.'

"The other replied: 'I'll do it.' Then the money was counted out and the 'papers' changed hands.

"While they talked, I was seized with an unaccountable desire to see the man I had once loved. I heard my maid moving in the next room, and I arose and went to her. She was a quick-witted creature, and knew just what to do. She made me put on a hat and veil, and throw a shawl about me, and then bade me go downstairs, while she knocked at the door of the sick-room. When I heard it open I was to come up, and while she made a pretence of offering her services in case of need, I could obtain, over her shoulder, a view of the occupants of the room. Her ruse was successful. When I ascended the stairs, I obtained a full view of the two men. I should know the dark face of the tall stranger, if I came upon it in Africa.

'To do myself justice, I never once thought of the wrong they were doing their victim; never realized that it was my duty to denounce them. Having seen the face of my husband I had but one idea, one desire; to get away, anywhere, the farther the better.

"Early the next morning, I was *en route* to the city, and there, to my infinite relief I found my friends ready to sail. When at last I was actually on the ocean, and realized that I was safe from discovery, I began to think of the victim whose name I had not heard. But it was too late then, and I tried to ease my conscience by thinking that, after all, as Edward was not dangerously hurt, it might not turn out a serious matter. I watched the papers, but somehow the accounts of the trial all missed me."

As she ceased speaking, her eyes rested sadly upon the face of Olive, and she started forward suddenly, saying: "Doctor, she is going to faint!"

"No," gasped Olive, half rising, "I, I ——"

And she fell forward to be caught in the ready arms of Clarence Vaughan. When at last they succeeded in arousing her from that death-like stupor, and she could sit up and look about her, slowly recalling events, Mrs. Ralston stepped readily into the position of leader, and turning to Claire, said:

"Go and see that lunch is served immediately, dear. We have much to do before night, and must not work fasting."

"Oh," cried Olive, as Claire disappeared, "is this true? Will Philip be released at last, released with every doubt cleared away, every suspicion removed? Tell me, I cannot realize it."

"It is true, dear Mrs. Girard; and now you must not give way to weakness. We dare not lose time. Dr. Vaughan, yourself and I, in putting these facts in the hands of the right parties, must hasten the legal process by which Philip will be released."

When Claire Keith returned, she found them deep in a discussion as to the quickes

way of effecting the release of Philip Girard.

"Let me settle it," she said, imperiously. "To-day you will go to see Philip's lawyers, and when this stupid law process is put in motion, Olive—I know her—will go straight and set herself down outside the very prison gates. But your beautiful laws can lock an honest man up much quicker than they can let him out, and can serve a warrant sooner than do a tardy act of justice. So, if you please, I am going down to Oakley to arrest that vile Lucian Davlin, and get him off poor Madeline's hands."

"You!" cried the two ladies in the same breath.

"Yes, I! Philip won't want anyone but Olive, and Olive will snub me unmercifully if I venture to offer myself as an escort. I'm going to do myself the honour of seeing Mr. Davlin arrested."

"Claire is right," said Mrs. Ralston; "the man must be arrested immediately."

"And," interrupted Olive, "you must all three go to Bellair; that is," looking at Mrs. Ralston, "if ——"

"If I will go?" interrupted that lady. "Yes, I, too, intend to be present when Miss Payne gives her enemy up to justice."

"Are you in earnest about going to Bellair, Miss Keith?" Clarence Vaughan asked. "Shall you go, really?"

Claire bestowed upon him a wilful little nod over her shoulder, saying, as she did so: "I shall, 'really.' I am confident that something will happen there, and I want a chance to faint?"

CHAPTER XLVI.

CORA "STIRS UP THE ANIMALS."

It was evening—the evening of the day on which Mrs. Ralston had made her startling revelation. Madeline Payne stood alone in her own room, looking moodily out upon the leafless grove that was fast taking on a covering of snow.

The storm that had been impending for days, had broken at last. For two hours the snow had been falling thickly, steadily, in great feather-like flakes, which quickly covered the brown earth, and clothed the naked tree-tops with a fair, white garment.

Madeline had been standing, motionless and moody, for many minutes. Her eyes were full of dissatisfaction, and her lips were compressed. She had been taking a mental view of the situation, and its present aspect was far from pleasing.

"What a knot," she soliloquised, "what a difficult, baffling, miserable knot! To be kept thus inactive just because the last knot in the tangle will not come straight—good gracious, how like a pun that sounds! How much longer must I smile upon these wretches? How much longer must I conceal my real feelings? I will put my forces into action, and make my last desperate venture, for this is becoming intolerable. I must force, or buy, this secret from Edward Percy, at the cost of his safety, or my fortune, if need be."

She pressed her face against the frosted pane, peering down through the gathering night and the snow.

"Mercy!" she ejaculated, "who on earth can be plowing through this storm? And on what errand? It looks like—and, as I live, it is, yes, it is, Mr. Edward Percy. He is too dainty to expose himself for nothing. I must look into this."

While she was musing at the window, Cora, curled up behind one of the crimson curtains of the red parlour, had become the possessor of a valuable secret.

She had entered the room but a few moments before. Finding it dimly lighted and heated to a Summer temperature, she ensconced herself *à la Sultana* in one of the deep window embrasures, and lay sulkily watching the flying snowflake and the fast coming night. Presently the sound of approaching footsteps, and almost simultaneously the opening of the door, disturbed her quiet. With a quick movement, she drew the curtains together and sat, a silent listener, to a brief dialogue.

The new comers were Miss Arthur and Edward Percy. After a few sentences had been interchanged, Percy left the room, and then it was that Madeline saw him take his way toward the village.

Presently Miss Arthur also quitted the room, and going straight up-stairs, Cora knocked at Madeline's door. "Now, then, muttered she, "I'll stir up the animals."

Madeline did not look especially gratified at sight of her visitor, but Cora entered with scant ceremony. Pushing the door shut with unnecessary emphasis, she turned upon her, saying rather ungraciously.

"I have made a discovery of which, I think, you will thank me for telling you. And I am going to tell you because I can't spoil their plans, but you can, and I want to see them spoiled."

"Your frankness is commendable," said Madeline, ironically. "Go on!"

"Percy and the old maid are going to be privately married to-morrow morning."

"How do you know?"

Cora related the particulars of her ambush, and gave a concise report of the conversation of the lovers.

"He has gone to the village on that very business now," Cora said. "She is to walk down to the clergyman's house, and he is to meet her there. Then they will come back, and no one be the wiser."

Madeline laughed. "Be at ease she said. "I will try and prevent the necessity for such a disagreeable walk as that would be for so fragile a lady. We won't have a wedding just yet."

"What a cool one you are!" cried Cora. "If you were not an enemy, I could admire you vastly."

"Don't I beg of you," said the girl gravely. "I am sufficiently humiliated by being obliged to deal with you as an enemy."

Cora flushed angrily. "Then I should think the humiliation of being made love to by my brother, would overcome you," she sneered.

"It does, almost, replied the girl, wearily.

"Then let me do you another favour. Mr. Davlin is no more my brother than he is yours."

Madeline's answer fairly took her breath away. "Madame, you are very good, but I have known that from the first."

"What!" gasped the woman, adding, after a moment of silence, "If he your lover as well as ——"

"Yours?" finished Madeline. "And what then, Mrs. Arthur?"

"Then," hissed Cora, "then, I hate you both.

Madeline laughed bitterly. "As you have told me a secret, and as I don't want to remain in your debt, I will tell you one in return. Lucian Davlin *is* my lover, but I am his bitterest foe!"

Cora came closer and looked her eagerly in the face. "What has he done to you?" she asked," breathlessly.

"You may find out later; just now we are even. Understand, no word of warning to him, if you value your safety. Obey my wishes, and when I am done with you, you may go free. Attempt any treachery, and I will give you up to justice."

"I shan't put myself in jeopardy for him now, whatever I might have done. You may believe that."

"I think I may," replied Madeline, dryly.

When Cora retired to her own room, to chuckle over the discomfiture in store for the spinster and Mr. Percy, and to wonder wrathfully what the mystery concerning Miss Payne and Lucian could mean, Madeline stood for many minutes lost in thought.

Finally she threw herself down upon a couch, uttering a half sigh, and looking utterly weary and perplexed. A moment later, Joliffe entered noiselessly, as usual, and the girl said to her:

"When Miss Arthur retires for the night, which won't be for some time, do you see Mr Percy when he is *alone*, mind,

and tell him Miss Payne desires him to wait her pleasure in the library."

Joliffe bowed and went out again like a cat.

When, at last, the other members of that incongruous family circle were safely out of the way, Madeline, warned by the ever-present, soundless Joliffe, awaited in the library the coming of Mr. Percy.

Wondering much what the haughty heiress could have to communicate to him, and dimly hoping that the tide was turning in his favour, Mr. Percy entered the presence of the arbiter of his fate. Bowing like a courtier, he approached her.

"Miss Payne has deigned to honour me with an interview," he said, in his slowest, softest, most irrisistable manner. "I can never be sufficiently grateful."

Madeline motioned him to a seat opposite her own, saying, with an odd smile, "You shall, at least, have an opportunity for repaying your debt of gratitude, sir, and that immediately."

Percy took the seat indicated and bowed gravely. "Command me, Miss Payne."

"It rests with you," Madeline began, "whether we shall be from to night neutral toward each other, or enemies."

"Enemies!" he exclaimed. "Oh, that would be impossible."

Madeline was full of inward rage. She longed to lean across the table and dash her hand full in that smiling blonde face. But she looked at him instead quite tranquilly, and said, with a queer smile: "Then you would do me a favour, even at your own personal—inconvenience, Mr. Percy?"

"Would I not?" fervently. "Only command me, Miss Payne."

"I will take you at your word, then. Mr. Percy, you will oblige me very much by putting off your marriage with Miss Arthur one week longer."

Here was a bomb-shell. It electrified the languid gentleman. He became suddenly animated by fear. "What—what do you mean, Miss Payne?" starting half out of his seat and nervously sitting down again.

"Precisely what I say, sir. It does not please me to have my relative leave my house to be married in this clandestine manner. There, don't ask me how I discovered what you thought was a profound secret. You see I did discover it. Will you put off this romantic marriage—to oblige me?"

Percy was trying very hard to think. If he could believe it was because he had found favour in her eyes, that she asked this. But no; even his vanity could not credit that suggestion. Of late she had openly shown a preference for Davlin.

What then, could be her motive? Could it be that at the instigation of Cora she had sought this interview?

He rallied his forces and replied: "Miss Payne, you have taken me by storm. If I may not ask how you made this discovery, may I not, at least, beg to know why you make this demand?"

"I have told you: it shocks my sense of propriety."

"Pardon me if I say there must be another motive."

"You are pardoned," coolly; "now, do you grant my request?"

Percy arose from the table flushed and angry. "Pardon me, Miss Payne, you demand too much."

"Nevertheless, I *do* demand it."

"And I beg to decline."

"Then I must deal with Miss Arthur. The knowledge that you have one wife in the grave, and another under this very roof, may have the desired effect upon *her*."

Percy dropped back in his chair, pale as ashes. All was lost, then. Cora had betrayed him; but he resolved not to commit himself. Perhaps Madeline had only verbal information. While he was trying to frame a speech, however, she knocked this last prop from under him.

"I may as well assure you that parleying is useless. I have known, from the first moment you entered this house, just upon what terms you stood with Mrs. Arthur. Don't trouble yourself to ask

how I know. Perhaps you have been puzzled to know why Mrs. Arthur and her brother so suddenly became cordial and invited you to Oakley, where you so much desired to be. Let me enlighten you. They fancied that you had regained possession of important documents — two marriage certificates, in fact—for they had lost them."

"What?" ejaculated Percy.

"And—I found them," added Madeline.

His countenance fell again.

"They are in my possession," pursued she. "Shall I show them to Miss Arthur, or not?"

"It can't make much difference now," said the man, sullenly.

Let us understand each other fully," said Madeline. "I am not acting in concert with Cora Arthur. She is even more in my power than you are. I have no desire to undeceive Miss Arthur. Neither do I wish you to leave Oakley. On the contrary, I want you here; you can be of service to me, by and by. And I pledge you my word that so long as you remain under this roof, those papers shall not be used against you."

"And if I don't choose to remain?"

Madeline laughed. "Then you must take the consequences," she said, carelessly.

"And what will they be?"

"Exposure and arrest."

Percy drew pen, ink and paper toward him. "What shall I write to the clergyman?" he asked, sullenly.

"Whatever you choose. And I will send it. Make your peace with Miss Arthur, too, in your own way."

"And when I leave Oakley, what then?" he grunted.

"Then, if you have filled the conditions, I will burn the papers in your presence, and you are free henceforth."

"There is the note," he said, flinging it toward her as soon as written. "After all, I may as well be in your power as in hers," and again he rose to go from the room.

"I am glad you take so sensible a view of it," retorted she, looking up from her perusal of his note. "Good-night, Mr. Percy."

And thus cavalierly dismissed, Mr. Percy bowed, somewhat less gallantly than when entering, and left the room.

"So, that is nipped in the bud," soliloquised Madeline, as she went wearily to her own room once more. "When will this miserable complication unravel itself, or be unravelled?"

Little did she dream how soon she would receive an answer to this question.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

THE next morning dawned clear and beautiful. Over head, one unbroken expanse of blue; under foot, a mantle of soft, white ermine. All the trees were transformed into fairy-like, silver-robed, pearl-studded, plume-adorned wonders. Diamonds floated in the air, and sunbeams lighted up the whole with dazzling brilliancy. Everything was white, pure, wonderful, and the whole enclosed in a monster chrysolite; earth, air and sky, were shut within a radiant sphere that had never an outlet.

Madeline had passed an almost sleepless night. But when she arose, with the first gleam of sunlight, and looked upon this new, white, imprisoned world, she felt strong for a fresh day's battle.

"I must go out," she said to herself; "out into this sparkling air. I can breathe in the brightness; I know I can. I almost feel as if I could catch it, and weave it into my life."

She hastily donned her wraps and set off for a brisk walk, no matter where, through that glorious Winter glow.

Under the snow-laden arms of the grand old trees, out of the grounds of Oakley. Before she realised it she was half way down the path leading to the village.

Something that jarred upon her sense of the beautiful, awakened her to herself, and she turned suddenly about.

"How dare ugly little brown bears come out in the white glitter," she muttered, whimsically. "I will turn about; he spoils the fairy picture. I had forgotton there were boys, or men, in the world."

Something came panting behind her. The "brown bear" had accelerated his pace, and now came up at a round trot.

"Hold on a minit; darned if I can see who ye air in this snow," he cried, pausing before her and rubbing his eyes vigorously. "All right; I thought it was you," he added, after considerable blinking. "I've got a tellygram for ye, Miss Payne; orders were not to give it to anyone but you, so I chased ye sharp."

Madeline laughed outright as she took the telegram from his hand. The boy, without waiting for her words of thanks, took to his heels, shouting back over his shoulder: "No answer!"

Madeline gazed for a moment after the flying figure, and wonderingly opened the message. This is what she read:

Be at H——'s to-night when evening train comes down. We are ready for action; have found a witness. C. V.

Madeline lifted her eyes from the scrap of paper and looked about her incredulously, as if she expected to find some explanation shining in the air.

"Ready for action," she murmured. "That means—can it mean that Lucian Davlin is at last in our power? Can those detectives have solved the mystery? Oh! how can I wait until night!"

She fairly flew along now, eager to keep in motion. On, on she went, over the stile, through the glittering white-robed grove; on, until she reached Hagar's cottage. It was locked and deserted, as she knew, but she cared not for that. She must walk somewhere, then why not here?

For a moment she stood on the snow-laden door-stone and gazed about her. Then swiftly, as swiftly as before, she flew down the path—the same path she had taken on the Summer day when she had heard from Hagar's lips her mother's story. When she reached the tree in whose arms she had nestled so often, where she had listened to the bargain between her step-father and decrepit old Amos Adams, and where she had been wooed by Lucian Davlin—she paused. There, coming toward her, was Lucian Davlin himself.

"What a fatality;" muttered the girl. "He is coming to meet me; has been watching me, perhaps."

She stood calmly gazing up at the snow-laden branches, and again she saw herself standing underneath them, a hesitating girl, wondering if she could let her lover go away alone. Then she turned her head and her eyes met those of Lucian Davlin.

"Good morning, Miss Payne," he said, lifting his hat with his usual grace. "I am happy to know that we have one taste in common—a love of nature in this disguise. Is not the wintry world beautiful?"

"Beautiful, indeed," replied Madeline, resuming her walk homeward. "The trees are fairy palaces. It is lovelier than Summer, is it not?"

"It is very lovely," gazing not at the trees but down into her face, "but—so cold."

She understood his meaning and replied, calmly: "Cold? Yes; it is not Summer."

"No," he assented, with a sad intonation, "it is not Summer, Miss Payne—Madeline, will it ever be Summer again?"

Madeline looked up and about her, and smiled as she did so. "Yes," she replied, "it will be Summer—soon."

He had turned and retraced his steps at her side. She was walking swiftly again, and for some time neither spoke. When they entered the grounds of the manor, he said, half deprecatingly:

"Madeline, may I ask this one question?"

"Yes," quietly.

"I saw you pause under that tree and

look about you," he said, slowly; "was it because you thought of other days, and of me?"

Slowly she turned her face toward him, saying, simply: "Yes."

They were nearing the entrance, and he half stopped to ask his next question. "Will you tell me what were your thoughts, Madeline?"

Slowly she ascended the steps, and at the door turned and faced him: "I will tell you to-night."

And with a ripple of laughter on her lips, she entered the hall of Oakley.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE SWORD OF FATE.

EVENING at Oakley.

At last the long day was done: the day that to Madeline Payne had seemed almost endless. At last, too, the early evening hours had dragged themselves away, and the time of her triumph was at hand.

From out Hagar's cottage a silent party issued, and took their way across the snow to the little stile just above the terrace walk. Here they paused for a moment. Some one was loitering on the terrace, where the shadows fell thickest. Madeline stepped through the gap, saying, softly: "Joliffe!"

Immediately the form emerged from the shadow. It was the cat-like waiting-maid.

"It's all right, Miss," she said, in a whisper. "They are all in the drawing-room, but I think they are getting uneasy."

"Well, I will not keep them in suspense long," said Madeline, and in the darkness she smiled triumphantly. "Lead on, Joliffe."

Silently they moved on, and paused again at the side entrance; the one from which Cora had endeavoured to escape but a short time before. Madeline opened the door, and in another moment she, with Mrs. Ralston, Claire Keith, Clarence Vaughan and two strangers, stood within the walls of Oakley.

They moved on like shadows to the rear end of the hall, up the servant's stairway, and straight to the west wing. Evidently they were expected here, too, for in obedience to a light tap, the door opened, and they passed quietly within the outer room of John Arthur's prison suite.

"Close the door, Henry," said Madeline.

This being done, she turned and surveyed her comrades.

"So far, good," she pronounced. "Now, can you make yourselves comfortable here for a little while? Hagar and Joliffe will know just what to do as soon as I have, myself, viewed the field of battle; or perhaps I had better pilot you in person."

"As you please," said the foremost of the strangers. "I think we understand each other."

"Then we won't lose time," said Madeline. "Henry, call Dr. Le Guise."

Henry tapped at the door of the inner room, and in a trice the worthy Professor stood in their midst. He glanced from one to another in amazement, and the look of confidence forsook his face. He had not been prepared to see these strangers, and his first thought was, of course, for his own safety.

"Have no uneasiness, sir," said Madeline, seeing the fear in his face; "these ladies and gentlemen will not interfere with you. They are here because it is desirable that the people below should not know of their proximity just yet. You are about to aid us, and need have no fear for yourself."

The Professor drew a breath of relief.

While this conversation was going on, Mrs. Ralston and Claire had removed their wraps, as if they knew quite well what they were about, which, indeed, they did. Now, as Madeline did likewise, preparatory to entering the room of the prisoner, they seated themselves, looking grave, but perfectly composed. Dr. Vaughan said a few quiet words to Henry.

and the two strangers stood "at ease," looking as indifferent as statues.

Entering the inner room, in company with the Professor, Madeline found John Arthur pacing restlessly up and down.

"I wish you to go downstairs with us for a few moments," said Madeline. "It is to your own interest to do so. It is the easiest and surest way of imparting to you what you must know, and, when you know all, I shall be your jailer no longer. It shall then remain for you to decide whether you will accept my terms, and end your days with at least a semblance of honour, or whether you will remain here to be pointed at as a man disgraced and dishonoured, and deservedly so. When you have seen justice done to those who have wronged you more than they have me, for little as I desire to serve you circumstances have constituted me your avenger—you will be free to act as you may see fit."

With this she turned and abruptly quitted the room, leaving John Arthur fairly stunned by her words, yet utterly unablet o comprehend their full meaning. Returning to the ante-room, Madeline found Hagar awaiting her.

"Well, Hagar," said the girl, "we are ready to go down; is the library lighted?"

"Yes, Miss Madeline."

"And the door leading to the drawing-room?"

"Is closed, Miss."

"Then go down, Hagar; open the library door, and leave it open. Move the fire screen opposite the door leading to the drawing-room. When we are all within the library turn out the light. That is all."

Hagar moved away to do her bidding, smiling grimly.

Time was dragging in the drawing-room.

Cora was there, not from choice, but because Madeline had so ordered it, and the aggrieved lady was not at all inclined to conversation.

Miss Arthur, who was hoping for a *tête-à-tête* with her lover, was alarmingly glum. She had accepted, in good faith, his statement that he had received a note from the clergyman, saying that he had been suddenly called away and would be absent some days, but she did not quite understand why another would not do as well. Somehow, all that day, she had found no opportunity for hinting to her lover that a Unitarian minister lived quite near.

Finding the ladies so little disposed to be entertained, the two men retired within themselves, each after his own peculiar fashion.

Lucian Davlin lounged, in his favourite manner, in a big arm chair, and absorbed himself in the mazes of "Lalla Rookh."

Percy, seated sidewise on a sofa directly opposite a large mirror, gazed languidly at his own reflected image, and furtively at the two women opposite, stroking his handsome blonde whiskers the while.

At last Miss Arthur broke the silence by saying, with a side glance toward Cora: "There is one thing that I have not yet asked to be enlightened about. Perhaps you could explain the mystery, Mrs. Arthur? I mean the appearance of Madeline at my bedside not long ago—or her ghost."

Cora uttered a disagreeable laugh, and then replied: "How should I be able to explain? I am not the keeper of Miss Payne, or 'her ghost.'"

"Probably not; however, you are so friendly, so sisterly, I might say, that I thought perhaps ——"

"You thought perhaps my step-mamma was in the secret?" said the voice of a new comer.

All eyes were turned toward the library where Madeline Payne stood clad in a walking dress, and looking fairly radiant with suppressed excitement.

"You misjudge my step-mamma, aunt Ellen." As she speaks, Madeline advances toward the silent group, leaving the library door ajar. "I will explain that singular phenomenon. I intend to clear up all the mysteries to-night—here—now. First

then, about the ghost; It was I, Miss Arthur, Madeline Payne, in the flesh."

Lucian Davlin's book lies on his knee neglected now.

Edward Percy's face has lost its look of languor.

Cora is flushing red and then paling, while she wonders inwardly if her time has come; if she is to be exposed to a last humiliation.

"We will settle another point," continues Madeline, imperturbably, while she rests one arm upon a cushioned chair-back, and looks coolly from one to another. "Some of you have felt sufficient interest in me to wonder why I sent home, to my sorrowing friends, the false statement of my death. I will explain that. When I left home it was with wrath in my heart, and on my lips the vow that I would come back and with power in my hands. I had wrongs to avenge, and I swore to be mistress of my own, and to bring home to a bad man the heart-ache and bitterness he had measured out to another. Well, I did not know just how this was to be accomplished, but Providence, or fate, showed me the way. Then I saw the necessity for coming back to Oakley, and to pave the way for my new advent, I sent Nurse Hagar with the false account of my death. A girl had died in the hospital—a poor, heart-broken, homeless, friendless, wronged little unfortunate—'Kitty the Dancer' she was called in the days when she was fair to see, and men, bad men, set snares for her feet."

What ails Lucian Davlin? He is compressing his lips, and struggling hard for an appearance of composure.

Madeline goes calmly on: "The poor girl died forlorn. She had been wooed by a vile man, a gambler. She had been to meet him and was returning from a rendezvous when the carriage that was conveying her to her poor lodging was overturned, and she was taken up a helpless, bleeding mass, and carried to the hospital. Then she sent for this heartless villain, again and again. She implored him to come to her, at least to send assistance, for she was destitute—a pauper. He refused, this thing, unworthy the name of man. He was setting other snares. He had no time, no pity, for his dying victim. Well, she died, and was buried as Madeline Payne, while I, standing beside her coffin, prayed to God to make my head wise and my heart strong, that I might hunt down, and drive out from the haunts of men, her soulless destroyer."

Madeline pauses, and three pair of eyes gaze at her with genuine wonder. But the eyes of Lucian Davlin are fixed upon vacancy, and with all the might of his powerful will he is struggling to appear calm.

Madeline turns her eyes calmly from his face to Cora's and seems to see nothing of this, as she resumes:

"Some strange fatality had made this man the bane of other lives, that were to be brought into contact with mine. I found that the happiness of two noble beings was being wrecked by this same man. One of these two had been my benefactor, had saved me from a fate worse than death; so I set myself to hunt this man down. And here I found that I could accomplish two objects at one stroke. I found that the man was playing into my hands. I followed him in disguise. Little by little I gained the knowledge of his secrets, enough to send him to State's prison and more than enough. But one thing was wanting For that I waited; for that I breathed the same air with creatures whom my soul loathed, and now that one missing link is supplied. At last, I am free! At last, I can throw off the mask! At last, I can say to the destroyer of poor Kitty, to the man who swore away the liberty of another to screen himself—'Lucian Davlin, I have hunted you down! I have held you here to be taken like a rat in a trap!' Officers, seize him! He has been my prisoner long enough!"

Was it a transformation scene?

While she is uttering those last words, suddenly the room becomes full of people,

and Lucian Davlin is writhing in the grasp of the two officers; struggling hopelessly, baffled completely, maddened with rage and shame. When at last he has ceased to struggle, because resistance is so utterly useless, he turns his now glaring eyes upon the brave girl whose life he had sought to wreck, and hisses:

"Don't forget to mention how you first came to the conclusion that I had wronged you! Don't forget to state that you ran away from Bellair with me; that you lodged in my bachelor quarters; that——"

A heavy hand comes in forcible contact with the sneering mouth, as one of the officers says, gruffly: "None o' that, my lad. I'd sooner gag you than not, if you give me another chance."

But Madeline answers him with a scornful laugh: "That I shot you in your own den! Coward! do you think my friends do not know all? Here stands the man who saw me in your company that night," pointing to Clarence Vaughan; "and here," turning to Claire, "is the sister of the woman who came to me, at Dr. Vaughan's request, and told me who and what you were! It was these two who nursed me during my illness, and who have been, from first to last, my friends. Bah! man, you have been only a dupe. Your servant, your doctor, your detectives, are all in my service? I have fooled you to the top of your bent, and kept you under this roof until we have found the proof that it was you, and not Philip Girard, who struck this man," pointing to Percy, "and robbed him, five years ago."

With a muttered curse, Lucian Davlin flings himself down in the seat he had lately occupied, the watchful officers, pistol in hand, standing on either side of him.

Edward Percy, for the first time since her entrance, withdraws his eyes from Madeline's face and casts a frightened glance about him. Having done this, he feels anything but reassured.

Near the outer door stand the two "well-diggers," who have entered like spirits, and now look as if, for the first time since their advent in Oakley, they feel quite at home. Nearest to Madeline stands Clarence Vaughan. Back of these, a little in the shadow, two others—two women. One stands with her face turned away, and he can only tell that the form draped in the rich India shawl is tall and graceful. But the other—she moves out from the shadow and her eyes meet his full.

Good heavens! it is Claire Keith!

He moves restlessly, his fair face flushing and paling. The first impulse of his coward heart is flight. But the two "well-diggers" are not surmountable obstacles. He turns his face again toward the Nemesis who is now gazing scornfully at him.

"I have no intention of neglecting any one of you four," she says, icily. "Edward Percy, I told you last night that I would burn certain papers in your presence. I am quite ready to keep my word. There will be no use for them after to-night. But I shall not stifle the testimony of living witnesses against you."

Then she raised her voice slightly. "Dr. Le Guise, bring in your patient."

John Arthur, pallid with fear and rage, stands upon the threshold of the drawing-room, closely attended by the Professor and Henry.

Then Madeline turned to the now terror-stricken Cora. "Come forward, Mrs. John Arthur." she says, scornfully. "It is time to let you speak!"

When Edward Percy turns his eyes toward Claire, she has instinctively moved nearer to Madeline's side, at the same time favouring him with a look so fraught with contempt that the villain lowers his eyes, and turns away his face. As Madeline now addresses the fair adventuress, Claire again moves. She has been standing directly between Cora and her Nemesis. Now she takes up a position quite apart from her friends, and near the officer who guards Lucian Davlin on the right.

Cora sees that all is lost. But she recalls the promises of safety given her by

Madeline, and nerves herself for a last attempt at cool insolence. Her quick wits have taken in the situation. Now she understands why Madeline has led Davlin on, and why her hatred of him is so intense. Now she knows the meaning of the words that last night seemed so mysterious: "Lucian Davlin is my lover, but I am his bitterest foe." Now, as she steps forward, the hate she feels shining in her eyes, and with a growing air of reckless bravado as she glances at him, Cora, too, is Lucian Davlin's bitter foe.

"Cora!" The name comes from the lips of John Arthur almost in a cry.

But she never once glances toward him. She fixes her eyes upon Madeline's face and doggedly awaits her command.

"Tell us what you know of this man," Madeline says, pointing to Edward Percy; "and be brief."

Cora turns her eyes slowly upon the man. She surveys him with infinite insolence, and then she turns with wonderful coolness toward Ellen Arthur.

"Miss Arthur," she says, with a malicious gleam in her eyes, "this will interest you. I knew that man ten years ago. I was making my first venture out in the world, and it was a very bad one. I fell in love with his pretty face, and married him. Before long I discovered that matrimony was a mania of Mr. Percy's—by-the-by, he sailed under another name then. I found that he had another wife living; a woman he had married for her money. Well, being sensitive, I took offence, and after a little, I ran away from him, carrying with me the certificates of his two marriages, which I had taken some pains to get possession of. After that——"

Cora pauses suddenly and glances toward Madeline.

"After that you went to Europe. You may pass over the foreign tour, and take up the story five years later," subjoins Madeline, coldly.

"After that, I went to Europe," echoes Cora. "And five years later found me in Gotham."

"Be explicit now, please: no omissions," commands Madeline.

"Five years ago, then," resumes Cora, "that gentleman there," motioning to Davlin, but never turning her face toward him, "came to me one day with the information that my dear husband was a rich man, thanks to some deceased old relative, and that his other wife was dead. For some reason this other marriage had been kept very secret, and my friend there argued that in case anything happened to Percy, I might come in as his widow, and claim his fortune. Well, Mr. Percy did not die, more's the pity. Instead of that he lived and squandered his money in less than three years. He was hurt, somehow, and a certain Mr. Philip Girard was falsely accused and convicted for attempted murder."

"Who was the real would-be assassin?" asked Madeline, sternly.

"Lucian Davlin!" emphatically.

Madeline turns swiftly to Percy. "Mr. Percy, explain, if you wish to lighten your own burden, by what means did that man persuade you to let him go free?"

"By—threatening me with an action for——"

"Bigamy!" finished Cora.

The villain, bereft of all hope and courage, stood white and trembling, under the eyes of his accusers and judges.

"I am letting these people hear you tell these things because I want that man,"—pointing to John Arthur, who had long since collapsed into a big chair—"to hear all this from your own lips," says Madeline.

Turning again to Cora, she says:

"Lucian Davlin made use of the papers—the certificates you had stolen from Edward Percy—to intimidate that gentleman, and secure himself from danger. Am I correct?"

"Yes," replies Cora, casting a malignant glance from one to the other of the accused men.

"Very good. Now we will pass on four or more years. You were in some little

trouble last June, Mrs. Arthur. Explain how you came to Bellair."

"How?"

"Yes, for what purpose. And at whose instigation."

Cora hesitated, and Davlin moved uneasily.

"Don't think that you will damage your cause by making a full statement," suggested Miss Payne, meaningly. "Answer my questions, please."

Again Cora glances at Davlin. Then turning toward Madeline, she assumes an air of defiant recklessness, and answers the questions promptly. "I came at Lucian Davlin's suggestion, and because he had induced me to think that I could easily become—what I am."

"And that is——"

"Mrs. Arthur, of Oakley!" with a mocking laugh.

The old man in the chair utters a loud groan, but no one heeds him. All eyes are fixed upon Madeline and Cora.

"You plotted to become John Arthur's wife?" pursues Madeline, relentlessly.

"Yes."

"And—his widow?"

No reply.

"You planned to keep him a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"And Lucian Davlin, your pretended brother, was your accomplice?"

"Yes."

Madeline turns swiftly toward her stepfather, as she does so moving nearer toward Edward Percy.

"John Arthur, are you satisfied?" she asks, sternly. "Shall the knowledge of your disgrace go beyond this room? Do you choose to remain here and be pointed at by every boor in Oakley, as the man who married an adventuress, a gambler's accomplice? or will you accept my terms?"

John Arthur lifts his head, then staggers to his feet. "Curse you!" he cries. "Curse you all! What proof have I that these people will respect my feelings?"

"You have my word," replies the girl, coolly. "These gentlemen of the Secret Service are not given to gossip. Mr. Davlin will have but little opportunity for circulating scandal where he is going. Mr. Percy and your wife will hardly remain in the neighbourhood long enough to injure you here, unless by your own choice. Your sister will scarcely betray you, and the rest are my friends. Choose!"

Pallid with rage and shame, the old man turned toward Cora.

"You she-devil," he screams, "this is your work——"

"No," interposes Madeline, calmly, "it is *your* work, John Arthur! What you have sown, you are reaping. Will you have all your guilty past, your shameful present, made known? Or will you leave my mother's home and mine, and cease to usurp my rights? Choose!"

Every eye is turned upon the old man and his questioner. Every ear is intently listening for his answer.

Every ear, do we say? No; one man is only feigning rapt attention: one mind is turning over wicked possibilities, while the others await, with different degrees of eagerness or curiosity, John Arthur's answer.

"Needs must when the devil drives," says the baffled old man, turning toward the door. "I will go, and I leave my curse behind me!"

This is the moment which Lucian Davlin has watched. While all eyes are turned toward John Arthur, he bends suddenly forward. He has wrenched the pistol from one of his guardians, and the weapon is aimed at Madeline's heart.

Instantaneously there is a quick, panther-like spring, and Claire Keith's little hand strikes the arm that directs the deadly weapon. There is a sharp report, but the direction of the bullet is changed.

Madeline Payne stands erect and startled, while Edward Percy falls to the floor, the blood gushing from a wound in his breast. In another instant, Lucian Davlin lies prostrate, felled by a blow from one detective, while the other bends over him and savagely adjusts a pair of manacles.

The others, even to Cora, group them-

selves about the wounded man. Doctor Vaughan kneels beside him a moment, then he lifts his eyes to meet those of Madeline.

"It is a death wound," he says.

"Prepare a couch in the next room directly. He must not be carried up-stairs."

When this order has been obeyed, and the injured man has been removed, Madeline returns to the drawing-room, untenanted now save by the officers and the prisoner. They are waiting there until the midnight train shall be due, and the time approaches.

Moving quite near to the now silent, sullen villain, the girl surveys him with absolute loathing.

"The goddess you worship has deserted you, Lucian Davlin," she says slowly. "It was not in the book of chance that you should triumph over or outwit me. The bullet you designed for me has completed the work you began five years ago. Go, to live a convict or die on the scaffold, and when you think upon the failure of your villainous schemes, remember that this retribution has been wrought by a woman's hand! Officers, take him away!"

Through the darkness they hurry him, from the sights and scenes of Oakley and Bellair—for ever. His goddess has indeed forsaken him. When the two officers take leave of him at the prison, he has had his last glimpse of the outside world.

From the moment when he failed in his attempt upon the life that had defied him, no word had escaped his lips. Silent, moody, and utterly hopeless, this proud-spirited, evil-hearted son of Chance, enters the prison gates, and, as they close upon him, we have done with Lucian Davlin, a convict *for life!*

CHAPTER XLIX.

AS THE FOOL DIETH.

EDWARD PERCY is dying—was dying when they lifted him from the drawing-room carpet, and gently laid him on the couch hastily prepared by Hagar and the frightened servants. They have watched beside him through the night, and now, in the gray o the morning, Clarence Vaughan still keeps his vigil.

The wounded man moves feebly, and turns his fast dimming eyes toward the watcher. "I thought—I saw—someone," he says brokenly, "when I fell. Who—was the lady?"

His voice dies away, as Clarence, bending over him, answers gently: "You mean the lady that stood near the door, whose face was turned away?"

"Yes," in a whisper; "was it—my—wife?"

Clarence turns toward the window where Mrs. Ralston sits, out of view of the sick man.

She moves forward a little. "Tell him," she says, in a low voice.

Edward Percy is a dying man, but his mind was never clearer. He perfectly comprehends the explanations made by Clarence. He had recognized the face of his wife when he lay bleeding at her feet, He closes his eyes, and is silent for some moments. Then he asks, in that dying half-whisper, the only tone he ever will use: "You think—I—will—die?"

"You cannot live," replies Clarence, gravely.

Again the wounded man shuts his eyes and thinks; then:

"How long—will I—last?" he questions.

"I can keep you alive twenty-four hours—not longer," says Clarence, after a pause.

"Then—I must talk now."

Clarence goes to a table, and pours something into a tiny glass. This he brings, and putting it to the lips of the patient, says;

"Try and swallow this. It is a stimulant. Then lie quiet for a few moments, after that you may talk."

This is done, and for a time there is silence in the room. Then the wounded man whispers, with an appearance of more strength: "Tell *her* — to come here."

Mrs. Ralston moves forward, and he looks at her long and attentively. Then with a turn of his olden coolness: "You grew tired of me," he said.

"Yes," she replies, in a low, sad voice, "I grew tired of you; very tired. But don't talk of those days now. You are too near the end; think of that!"

"I do," he said, slowly. "But I can't alter the past—and—I don't know—about the future. I want—to see a—notary."

"Don't you want to see a clergyman?"

"What for? If I am dying—it's of no use to play—hypocrite. I don't believe in—your clergyman. I admit that—I wronged—you," he continues, gazing at Mrs. Ralston, "and I deceived Miss Keith. If you two—can forgive me—I will take my chances—for the rest."

Mrs. Ralston bends above him with a face full of pity, but in which there is no love. "I forgive you, Edward; and so will Claire, fully. But you did her very little harm. She was not long deceived. Do you want to see her?"

"Yes; and—don't let Alice—Cora, you call her—come near me."

Truly, this dying sinner is not a meek one, not a very repentant one.

When they ask him if he will see Miss Arthur, his reply is characteristic. "Does she want—to see—me?"

No; she has not asked to see him, they say. But of course she would be glad to come to him.

"Let her alone," he says, "she don't want to see me. If she did, it would be to scratch out—my eyes—because she is—cheated out of—being married. She isn't hurt. She is too big a fool."

When Claire comes to his bedside, accompanied by Madeline, he says: "Miss Claire—I loved you better than any woman I ever knew—truly. If—you had been Mr. Keith's heiress—I would never have come to Oakley. I thought you were—his heiress when—I wooed you—in Baltimore. But you are the only woman—who ever beat me—and puzzled me. You did not care much, after all."

To Madeline he says, after he has swallowed a second stimulant: "But for you, I would not be here. You women have hunted me down. But you are as brave—as a lioness—a little Nemesis. I—won't—bear malice."

At noon, the notary comes, and Edward Percy makes an affidavit as to the truth of the testimony that will convict Lucian Davlin. It is the affidavit of a fast dying man.

All day Mrs. Ralston sits beside him. And Clarence Vaughan watches the slowly ebbing life tide. Once he seems struggling to say something, and his wife bends down to catch what may be some word of penitence.

"Bury—me like a gentleman."

This is what he says, and Clarance Vaughan smiles bitterly as he thinks, "selfish and egotistical to the last."

Night comes on and the end is very near. Over the dying face flits a malignant shadow, and he makes a last effort to speak. Again the watchers bend nearer.

"I hope—they will—hang Davlin," he breathes, feebly.

The two listeners recoil with horror, at the sound of the vindictive wish from dying lips.

These are the last words of Edward Percy. Slowly go the minutes, and deeper grow the shadows. Again Clarence Vaughan bends above the couch, and then he says; "Your vigil is ended, Mrs. Ralston. He is dead."

That night, while the house is hushed to a quiet, one portion of the household asleep, the other keeping the death watch, Cora again tries to escape from Oakley.

But this time Strong is not to be caught napping, and the vanquished adventuress resigns herself to her fate.

Two days more, and then Edward Percy is buried, according to his request, "like a gentleman."

All that is known outside of Oakley concerning his death is that he was shot

by Lucian Davlin, between whom, and himself, some feud had existed.

And John Arthur and Cora remain, and "keep up appearances" to the last.

Dr. Le Guise, or the Professor, has stayed too, for appearance sake. But the day after they had buried Edward Percy, he goes, and very gladly, back to the city. Madeline keeps her promise, he goes free, and none save the few ever know that Dr. Le Guise is an imposter.

At the same time John Arthur turns his back upon Oakley for ever. "Appearances" are observed to the last. He goes, tenderly attended by the Professor, by Cora, and by his sister. Goes much muffled, and enacting the *role* of invalid.

They are taking the sick man South; this is what the villagers think.

But when the train reaches the city, this select party disbands. John Arthur becomes active once more and, with his sister, hurries away in the nearest cab, while the Professor and Cora separate by mutual consent.

And here we will leave them—all but Cora.

She has escaped Scylla only to fall upon Charybdis. As she hurries along through the familiar streets, her plans are laid. She will go to Lucian Davlin's rooms, nobody will be there to dispute her possession for a day or two to come, and she has] possessed herself of the keys, left behind as useless by their outlawed owner.

When she ascends the steps, some one, who is lounging past the premises, looks at her narrowly. As she disappears behind the swinging outer door, this lounger becomes wonderfully alert, and hastens away as if he had just discovered his mission.

Two hours later, as Cora descends the stairs and emerges into the street, the vision of a monkey-faced old man appears before her. And while another lays a firm, detaining hand upon her arm, the old man, fairly dancing with glee, cries out:

"Ah, ha! here you are, my pretty sharper! I didn't have these premises watched for nothing, did I? Now I have got you! Bring her along, officer, bring her along. She won't dodge us this time."

And Cora is hurried into a cab, closely followed by Old Verage, who chatters his doubtful consolation, and laughs his eeldrich laughter, and finally consigns her to prison to answer to a charge of swindling.

CHAPTER L.

"AND THEN COMES REST."

At last Oakley is rid of its *intriguants*, its plotters and impostors.

And Madeline and Claire sit alone in the chamber of the former, talking of the strange events that have so lately transpired—of Philip Girard's vindication, of Lucian Davlin's punishment, of Edward Percy's death.

It is the day following that of the burial, and Mrs. Ralston is lying asleep in her own room, with old Hagar in near attendance.

"Poor Mrs. Ralston," says Claire, after a long pause in their converse. "She is thoroughly worn out, and yet, weary as she was, she must have talked with you for hours, Madeline, after we came back from the grave."

Over Madeline's face flits an odd, half-sad smile, as she replies, dreamily:

"Yes, we talked a long time, dear; Mrs. Ralston was then in the mood for talking. Can't you understand how one may be nervously active, may be at just that stage of bodily weariness when the mind is intensely alive? The excitement of all she had lately undergone was still upon her, and the mind could not resign itself to rest while anything remained unsettled or under a cloud."

"Oh, I can understand how that may be." Then, after a pause, "so something remained to be settled?"

"Yes."

"And, between you, you disposed of the difficulty?"

"Yes."

Another silence. Then Madeline turns to look at her companion.

"Why don't you ask me what the 'difficulty' was?"

No answer.

"But you want to know?"

Claire laughs nervously.

"And I want to tell you," pursues Madeline. "First, we talked of ourselves."

"Oh!" ejaculates Claire, looking immensely relieved.

"Yes, we talked of ourselves first; and we have become great friends."

"Of course!" cries Miss Enthusiasm; "I knew you would."

"We have decided to give our new friendship a severe test."

"How?" asks Claire, forgetting her caution.

"By visiting Europe in each other's society."

Claire springs up excitedly. "Madeline Payne, you don't mean it! You *can't!* You *shall* not; there! Europe, indeed. You are crazy! I won't hear of it!" stamping her foot emphatically.

Madeline leans back in her chair and laughs; then suddenly becomes grave.

"But I do mean it, Claire, my darling," she says, softly. "And I'll tell you what else I mean. Sit down here, close beside me and listen."

Instinctively Claire obeys.

"Now, then," continues Madeline, "you know what an odd, uncultivated sort of a life mine has been, and you know that this little world of mine has not been a very bright one. Well, ever since I could read and think, I have longed to see Italy, and France, and England, and Germany, and the Holy Land. My work is done here. There is nothing now to prevent my going—no duty to perform, no one to keep me here. I could not find a better friend and companion than Mrs. Ralston, and she is very anxious to go, and to take me with her. You are all very dear to me, but no one needs me now more than she, nor so much. And, Claire, don't make any mistakes about me. I am not going away sorrowfully, or with any heavy weight upon my spirits. I am going to enjoy and make the most and best of the life and youth God has given me I am going for change, and recreation, and rest. I have been acting the part of an avenger here, a stern, unforgiving Nemesis, but I would do over again all that I have done, if need be. I am not half so good as you. I cannot submit with meekness to injustice and wrong. I shall fight my enemies, if I have more to fight, until the end of the chapter. And now I have a confession to make."

Claire stirs uneasily. "Don't," she says, deprecatingly: "I don't want to hear a confession."

"But I want to make one, and you must listen. First, however, let me tell you that during my talk with Mrs. Ralston, I heard about a certain interview, wherein a ridiculous young lady discarded the man she loved because she fancied she would wrong someone else if she admitted her love for him, and accepted his. Well—don't turn your face away—that was foolish. But my blunder was a downright wicked one. Yes, Claire, I will tell all the truth. When you and I stood together out under the trees, and talked of Clarence Vaughan; when you shewed me the picture and told me the little pastoral about Edward Percy; I knew that Clarence Vaughan loved you—and I thought I loved, nay, I did love, *him*.

"When I came down here and found so soon that Edward Percy was—so utterly unworthy, we will say, because he is dead, I felt at once that you must be undeceived.

"Then a great temptation came to me, and I said to myself, 'When she becomes disenchanted, and ceases to love this man, she will learn to value the other and more noble lover; she will learn to love him!'

"All night long, before I came to undeceive you, and to warn Olive, I battled with a great temptation. And I yielded to

it. Listen, Claire, while I tell you how base I was.

"When I set out for the city in the morning, I said to myself: 'Claire Keith is the soul of truth and honour. She is generous to a fault. If I let her see how much I care for Clarence Vaughan, I shall appeal to her pity and her honour, without the aid of words. She will never listen to his suit; she will try to advance my interest; she will become my ally.' See, dear, how truly I judged you.

"Well, I came. I told you of Percy's baseness, and when I saw how brave you were; how full of scorn for the dishonest man; how impossible it was for one so unworthy to drag you down, or darken your life because of his baseness; I was filled with shame and remorse. I knew then that I was unworthy your friendship, or of a good man's love.

"Standing in your presence, humiliated by your pure nobility, I repented, and I resolved to give up all thought of Clarence Vaughan. I did give him up.

"But, Claire, although I did not know it, my very penitence must have committed me, and while I was renouncing my designs, you were resolving to further them, in some manner I must have betrayed myself."

There is a moment's pause. Claire Keith's face is buried in her hands, and Madeline, bending towards her, cries out, remorsefully:

"Claire! Claire! Look up and believe me. As God hears me, that is past and dead. See how I am humbling myself, and do not doubt me."

Claire's head rears itself suddenly. She flings herself forward impetuously, and clasps her arms about her friend.

"Madeline, stop!" she cries, brokenly; "I won't hear you slander yourself. Don't I know you too well to doubt you! But I won't have a lover; I won't love anyone but you."

Again the laugh comes to Madeline's lips.

"Little Miss Impulse!" she says, tenderly. "But, sister Claire, I am not done yet. I am going to put you on the penitent's stool now. Just imagine yourself in my place for a little. Do you think I could have made this confession to you if my weakness were not a thing of the past? You know I never could. I am not ashamed to confess that I did love Clarence. But I should be more than ashamed, under all the circumstances, if I could not say with truth that that love is a thing of the past. As my dearest friend, my brother, if you will, I shall always love him; but no more than that. I am not sorry that I have loved him, for I am a better woman because of it. But, I repeat it, that love is a thing of the past. Claire, do you not believe?"

They gaze into each other's eyes for a moment. Then Clair says: "I believe, Madeline."

A smile brightens the brown eyes now, and their owner says: "Then don't you see that you have made a mistake—one that, for my sake, you must rectify?"

Claire begins to look rebellious. "No, I don't," she cries, blushing scarlet. "You wicked girl, you have been getting me into a trap!"

Madeline says, very gravely:

"Claire, I want you to trust me in this, as you all have in other things. I want you to let me feel that I have not made the friends I love best, unhappy. I shall leave you soon: if I have been your friend, let me have my way in this one thing. If you don't, all the rest will have been in vain. See, my drama is ended; my enemies are punished. Now let me make my dear ones happy. Do you know, John Arthur has put a new thought into my head. 'Confound you,' he growled; it was his parting benediction, 'I might have known your father's blood ruled you. I might have looked for cunning and intrigue from that confounded Expert's Daughter.' It is true, Claire; I am the daughter of an Expert, a detective, brave and shrewd. Hagar says that I am like my father, and that I have inherited his talents. When I

recall the knot we have just unravelled, the war we have just waged, I can but think that my father's chosen calling may have become mine. If the world ever grows stale, if I pine for change or excitement or absorbing occupation, I can go to my father's chief and say, 'I am the daughter of Lionel Payne, the Expert, and I have inherited a measure of my father's talents.' Do you think he will trust his knotty cases to the Expert's Daughter?"

"I think he will, if he is wise. But, Madeline, all this is folly. You will never leave us. Olive wants you; we all want you."

"And you will all have enough of me. But, Claire, do not ask me to stay now. It is better for me, better for all, that I go away. I must let old memories die out. I want to forget old scenes. I want rest. I need to school my wayward nature, to teach my heart to beat calmly, my soul to possess itself in peace. Claire, I must go."

Just here, some one taps softly. It is a servant who holds in her hands a telegram from Olive to Madeline, which runs thus:

All is well. Philip and I start for home to-night. Meet us there without fail, all of you. OLIVE.

They read it together, and then Claire burst into tears—tears of joy and thankfulness.

"Philip is free once more! Oh, Madeline, Madeline; and it was you who saved him; it was *you!*"

Madeline pushes the message into her hand, saying: "If I have done such wonderful things, why do you refuse to obey me? Go, now, and take this good news to Clarence Vaughan. And mind you, don't come back, for I am going to tell Mrs. Ralston."

Half laughing, half crying, Claire is compelled to go down to the library alone. Clarence Vaughan is there, pacing thoughtfully up and down.

Claire enters softly, the paper ostentatiously displayed in her hand. But he looks straight at the blushing, bashful, tear-stained face. Her eyes, half glad, half shy, wholly tell-tale, fall before his own. And the lover who has waited in patience for his opportunity, seizes it now and makes it a moment of victory.

"I have brought you good news, Dr. Vaughan."

He comes straight towards her, and imprisons both little hands, together with the "news" they contain.

"You have brought me yourself, then, and I have been lying in wait for this opportunity. Claire, shall you ever run away from me again?"

It is useless to rebel. His voice tells her that he knows too much, and that he will not be evaded any more.

She gives him one glimpse of her face, and then she is clasped in his strong, loving arms, and from this safe haven, after a time, she tells her good news, struggling prettily to free herself from the loving imprisonment.

"Philip is free, and is coming home."

"Of course; why not, darling? There is no accusation against him now."

"Madeline is going away with Mrs. Ralston. Don't you think she is too bad? Can't we make her stay?"

A look of regretful sadness rests for a moment upon his countenance. Then he says, very tenderly:

"My little darling, Madeline has earned the right to her own perfect liberty. After the fierce schooling through which she has passed, believe me, there is nothing left for us to teach her. She has grown beyond us. Let her have her will, for she knows best what will give her the rest, the forgetfulness, the absorbing interest in other things, that her strong nature needs. Madeline has much to unlearn, much to forget; and she knows this. She is growing to understand her strong, brave self, to value her strength. She will never be an idler, never sink into the ranks of the commonplace. If, after a time, she finds for herself a worthy love, she will be the tenderest, the truest of wives. But she is

sufficient unto herself. She has beauty, genius, force, a strong will, a splendid intellect. We shall watch her course from afar, and I am much mistaken if we do not, some day, hear great things of our Madeline."

Claire draws herself gently from the restraining arm, and turns her blue eyes upon him.

"Madeline will never marry," she says softly, sadly. "You are right; she is above us, beyond us. God has made her sufficient unto herself."

It is dawn, gray dawn.

Madeline Payne rises from a long untroubled sleep, and flings wide her shutters.

What is this that she sees?

All below her an unbroken mantle of white; all about and above, the waving of snowy plumes, and floating, misty-white loveliness.

The world is clothed in a new garment; the foot-prints of her enemies are hidden, are blotted from the face of the earth. The pathway to the cemetery where they lately bore Edward Percy, is obliterated, too. The grave of the erring man is covered with heaven's whitest, purest mantle of charity and forgetfulness.

Above, below, all about her, is silence and whiteness and peace.

She sinks to her knees, and leaning out, absorbs into herself the restfulness, the peace, the white, pure glory of the dawn.

"It is a token," she murmurs, softly. "It is God's benediction on my new day on my new life. It is the beginning of rest. There is nothing old in this fresh, white world. Let the snow mantle rest thus upon my past life. Ah, how rich I am! How rich in friends; how strong in that I have been able to do some good, to make my beloved happy. Never let me repine at my fate. I am rich, and strong, and free. This new, white, beautiful world is mine, when I wish to wander. My friends are mine, when I wish to rest, and find a home."

Ah, 'tis good to know ——

"God's greatness shines around
our incompleteness;
Round our restlessness, *His rest.*"

Up from the east shoots an arrow of gold, and a bar of roseate light. Higher yet, and the world is aglow with mystic, glittering loveliness. Diamonds sparkling everywhere; snow plumes waving; the earth's white unbroken mantle gleaming and sparkling, and stretching away to meet the golden glow at the horizon's edge.

Kneeling there, with her white hands clasped upon the window ledge, the glory of the morning falls over her like a benediction; lighting up the golden hair; pouring its radiance into the solemn brown eyes; kissing the pure pale cheeks; breathing peace, and rest, and hope into the long-tried, but conquering heart of THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER.

THE END.

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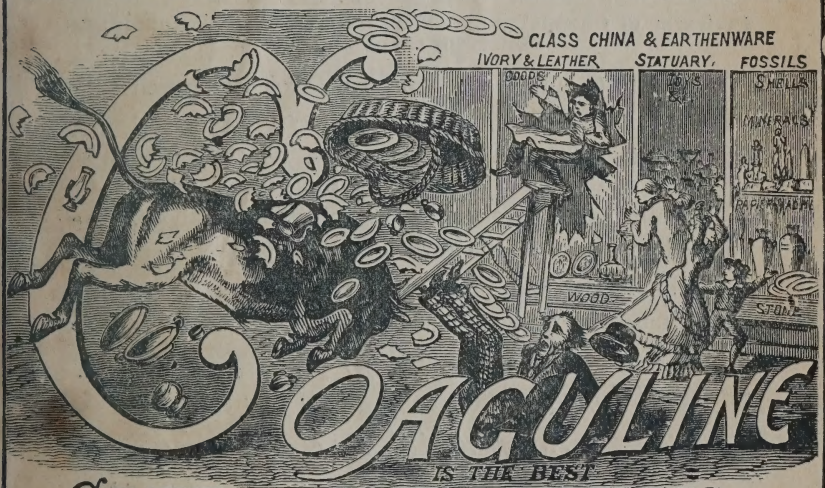

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